

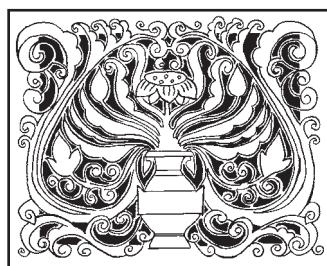


# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

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*Amrita Kalasha*

**EDITORIAL OFFICE**

Prabuddha Bharata  
Advaita Ashrama  
PO Mayavati, Via Lohaghat  
Dt Champawat · 262 524  
Uttarakhand, India  
E-mail: [prabuddhabharata@gmail.com](mailto:prabuddhabharata@gmail.com)  
[awakened@rediffmail.com](mailto:awakened@rediffmail.com)

**PUBLICATION OFFICE**

Advaita Ashrama  
5 Dehi Entally Road  
Kolkata · 700 014  
Tel: 91 · 33 · 2244 0898 / 2245 2383 /  
2245 0050 / 2216 4000  
E-mail: [mail@advaitaashrama.org](mailto:mail@advaitaashrama.org)

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# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राय्य वराण्शिबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

## Darśana: Philosophical Vision

August 2007  
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नित्योऽनित्यानां चेतनश्चेतनानामेको बहूनां यो विदधाति कामान् ।  
तमात्मस्थं येऽनुपश्यन्ति धीरास्तेषां शान्तिः शाश्वती नेतरेषाम् ॥

There is one who is the eternal Reality among non-eternal objects, the one [truly] conscious Entity among conscious objects, who, though non-dual, fulfils the desires of many. To the wise who perceive Him within themselves belongs eternal peace, unto none else. *(Katha Upanishad, 2.2.13)*

यस्यामतं तस्य मतं मतं यस्य न वेद सः ।  
अविज्ञातं विजानतं विज्ञातमविजानताम् ॥

He by whom It is not known, knows It; he by whom It is known, knows It not. It is not known by those who know It; It is known by those who do not know It. *(Kena Upanishad, 2.3)*

यस्मिन्सर्वाणि भूतान्यात्मैवाभूद्विजानतः ।  
तत्र को मोहः कः शोक एकत्वमनुपश्यतः ॥

For the person who has realized the Self—in which all beings become the Self—what delusion and what sorrow can remain for that seer of oneness? *(Isha Upanishad, 7)*

बदन्ति तत्त्वविदस्तत्त्वं यज्जानमद्यम् ।  
ब्रह्मेति परमात्मेति भगवानिति शब्द्यते ॥

The non-dual Consciousness is called the Supreme Truth by enlightened sages; it is also termed Brahman [by Vedantins], Paramatman [by yogis], and Bhagavan [by devotees]. *(Bhagavata, 1.2.11)*

Divine Wisdom created the world in order that all things in His knowledge should be revealed. *(Jalaluddin Rumi)*

Knowledge is an inner fortification that enemies cannot destroy, and is the ultimate impregnable defence. *(Tirukkural, 421)*

The shrine of the body should not be left dark; one should illumine it with the lamp of Wisdom. *(Sri Ramakrishna)*

# THIS MONTH

This issue inaugurates a series of **Reflections on Philosophy** which will not only record the shift in philosophical thinking in recent times but will also provide important insights into the philosophy underlying various branches of knowledge.

**Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago** takes a look at 'Occasional Notes' on karma yoga.



Prof. J N Mohanty, Department of Philosophy, Temple University, Philadelphia, brings his long global experience in pursuit of philosophy into foreseeing the future of **Philosophy in the Twenty-first Century** and the challenges that await it.

The sophisticated linguistic insights of ancient Indian grammarians, Bhartrihari in particular, well anticipate the thoughts of postmodern linguists and also make us reconsider our understanding of language, meaning, and reality. Dr Kapil Kapoor, Professor of English and Concurrent Professor, Sanskrit Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, presents these remarkable insights in **Philosophy of Language in the Vaiyakarana Tradition**.



Dr Jeffery D Long, Chair, Department of Religious Studies, Elizabethtown College, Pennsylvania, surveys the course of philosophical studies on religion and presents a bird's-eye-view of **Philosophy of Religion: From East to West and Back Again**.

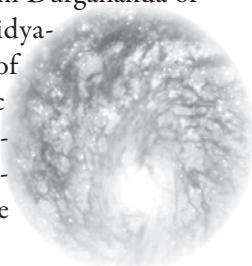
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**Ethics: Some Contemporary Views** is a fresh look at a traditional branch of philosophy by Dr M Sivaramkrishna, Former Head, Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad.

In the first instalment of **The Cosmos in Western and Indian Thought** Swami Durgananda of the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya, Coimbatore, apprises us of the philosophical and scientific views of the universe as they developed in the West. The Indian views will be presented in the next instalment.

Pandit Ramendrasundar Bhattacharya's **Reminiscences of Sri Ramakrishna**—the fascinating impact of a solitary meeting—have been made available in English by Swami Chetananandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis.



**Hiranyagarbha's Tale from the Library** is a narrative of love and hope in times of tragedy. The author is member of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, Hollywood.



Dr Prema Nandakumar, researcher and literary critic, Srirangam, concludes her portrayal of **Kanchipuram, the Four-fold Glory** with devout rounds of Vishnu Kanchi.

PB August 2007

## Reflections on Philosophy

**A**t the launch of *Prabuddha Bharata*, Swami Vivekananda had cautioned: 'Avoid all attempts to make the journal scholarly—the *Brahmavadin* stands for that. ... The main feature should be the teaching of *principles* through stories. Don't make it metaphysical at all.' But within a few decades 'the spirit of *Brahmavadin* had come into the *PB*', and by the nineteen-thirties 'much of the meat the *PB* provides now is tough for ordinary teeth'. This was because its contributors—both from India and abroad—included some of the best thinkers of the time; and philosophy as an academic discipline was engaging some of the best minds in the early twentieth century. But, over the last few decades there has been a radical shift in philosophical thinking as well as in the organization of philosophy as a discipline. The departments of philosophy in Indian universities have witnessed a sharp decline in the prestige they once commanded. The reasons are several: (i) Traditional Indian philosophy is often seen as being primarily religious; more a branch of religious studies than philosophy. (ii) The proliferation of religious studies departments in Western universities and the wealth of literature they have been churning out on Indian religions and society coupled with a near absence of similar developments in Indian universities has virtually left Indian religious philosophy adrift, devoid of its moorings. (iii) The interest in Indian philosophy in Western academia continues to be marginal. So the global impetus needed for the nurturance of this discipline remains feeble.

The problems outlined above are, however, not incontestable. The Bristol scholar Paul Williams notes: 'The all-too-common slogans that "Indian philosophy is mystical", or "spiritual", or "Indian philosophy is intuitive", or "non-rational" (and there-

fore is not really philosophy at all, as Westerners understand the term), are, as characterizations of Indian philosophy, simply nonsense. They betray a gross ignorance of the vast critical analytic writing produced in India covering the nature of knowledge, perception, causation, truth, the nature of valid inference, consciousness, word and referent, ontology, and so many other clearly philosophical issues.'

Professor J N Mohanty has argued persuasively against Advaita Vedanta being termed *religion* in the Western sense of the term: 'In the process of *sadhana*, *shravana* is hermeneutical, *manana* is philosophical, *nididhyasana* is meditative. None is religious. ... *Moksha*, the goal of this process, is not supernatural, otherworldly, soteriological. It is not salvation. It is discovery of the identity between the innermost truth of one's "psyche" and the innermost being of the world: of psychology and physics. What is religious about it?'

A more contemporary view sees philosophy as the study of the theoretical bases of specific branches of knowledge or experience—reflections on the assumptions, methods, aims, and claims of specialized pursuits like science, mathematics, law, history, political science, economics, medicine, religion, language, and so on, besides the study of such traditional subjects as ethics and aesthetics.

In launching this series on 'Reflections on Philosophy' we invite you to take a fresh look at the diverse aspects of contemporary philosophical thinking. Philosophy was 'love of wisdom' for the Greeks, and 'perception of truth' (*darshana*) for Indians. Philosophy is also about attitudes we hold as individuals or as groups, attitudes that act as guiding principles for behaviour. In times of exploding knowledge we need to keep updating our philosophies as well as our understanding of philosophy. This and the forthcoming numbers should help you do that.



# Prabuddha Bharata—100 years ago

## Occasional Notes: August 1907

**P**iverse are the ways that lead man to God. One may be more suitable for some than another. But there is none that is bestrewn with roses, each has its peculiar difficulties. Karma Yoga may be easier than some other Yogas for men, who cannot completely cut themselves away from all ideas of work. But that too has its own thorns. We can work incessantly without much trouble, but when we want to work in the spirit of Karma Yoga, enormous difficulties seem to face us almost at every turn. Yet the unmistakeable voice comes from within our heart, that we are stronger than they; that we are sure to vanquish them if we are sincere and true to ourselves. The words of the great teachers also come to us and raise our drooping spirits, and by listening to them we are inspired with confidence. But the war must be waged by ourselves. No fight, no victory. No exertion, no success. And to fight the enemy triumphantly, we must know its strength. We must know the nature of the difficulties, if we want to surmount them. "Forewarned is forearmed," says the proverb.

One great danger of Karma Yoga is that it lapses into ordinary work. We may satisfy our natural craving for work, but we may imagine that we are performing Karma Yoga. Every work that brings success, or gratifies our innate desire for work brings some satisfaction to the mind, and this, we may easily mistake for the peace which religion brings. If we read the Gita between the lines, the one thought that strikes us as the keynote of Karma Yoga is, that we should rise superior to all considerations as to the agreeableness or disagreeableness of our duties. Attraction for what is pleasant, and aversion for the unpleasant are almost inseparable from human nature. But are they not at the root of all misery, ignorance and evil? The Karma-Yogin is therefore strongly advised to brush them away. He must be master of

nature and not its slave. The human must be raised to the divine.

What a hard task it is! If we keep our eyes open to the workings of our own minds, we find how the dread moral foes are trying to attack us by stealth, every moment of our life. If for a second we are off our guard, we are under their sway, we slip. One mistake often tends towards another, and we know not to what a moment's inadvertence will lead us.

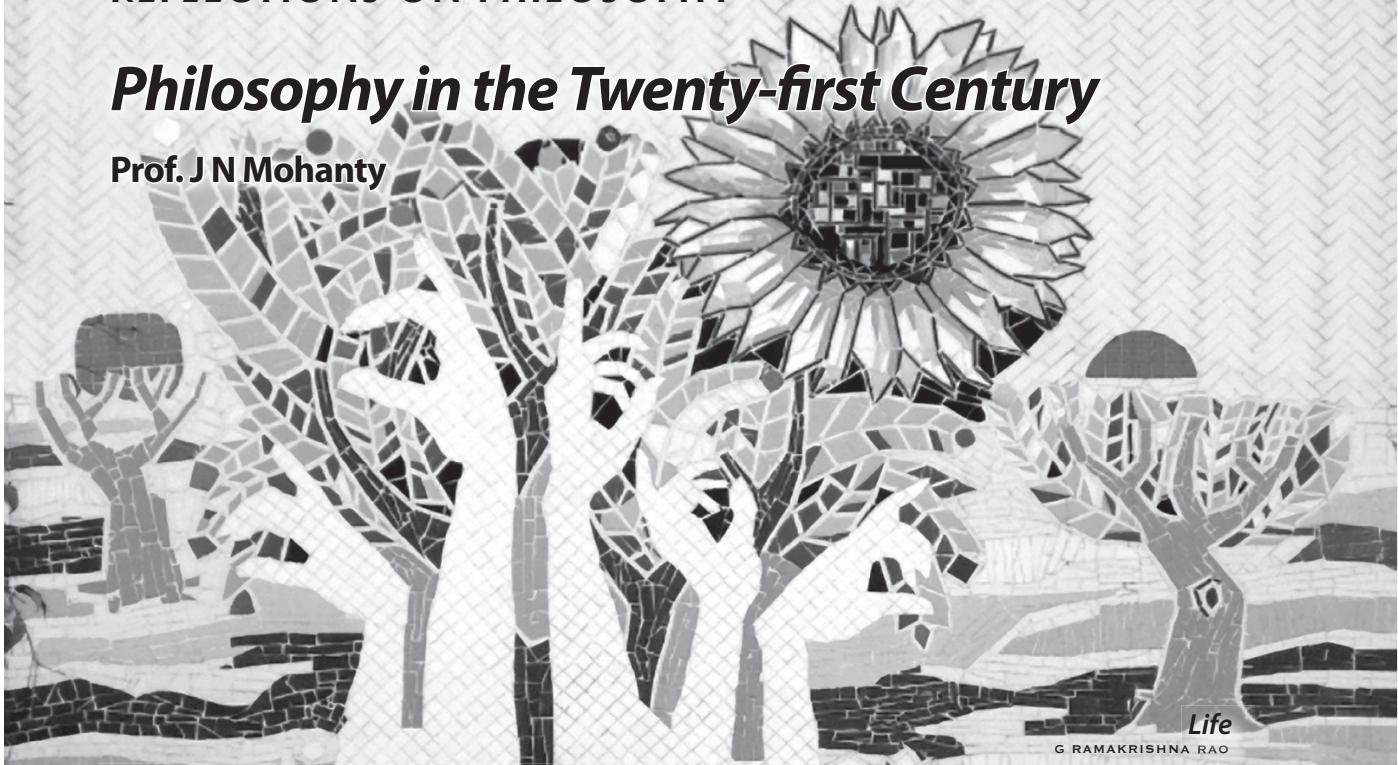
If we sincerely try to carry into practice the secret of Karma Yoga, as indicated above, we find that it is impossible to do so, unless we minimise to our own minds, the worth of this world in terms of the senses. How can we help being influenced by the things of the world, if they are substantial realities to us? Rightly has it been said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." If we think that the things of the world are valuable, what can keep us from becoming their slaves?

Again, the mind, by its very nature, is unable to alienate itself from the sense-world, unless it looks to something which is much greater, much more real, much more satisfying than the world; in other words, unless it meditates upon Him, who is the one cause of all Life, Knowledge and Bliss. By being centred in God alone, can we keep unaffected by the ills of life, turn work into worship, and do real good to others. The many become manifestations of God, when our consciousness is bathed in His light. And, lastly, how can we meditate upon Him unless our heart feels a strong attraction towards Him? Unless we love Him?

Thus we see that a true Karma-Yogin must be perfectly pure, meditative and a lover of God. All these must always live together. For religion brings about all-sided growth. And here again we look to the Gita for light.

# *Philosophy in the Twenty-first Century*

Prof. J N Mohanty



PHILOSOPHICAL thinking is an exercise of freedom of thinking, and so its course cannot be predicted. But like all freedom, it can unfold only within a contexture laid down by the preceding generations. When we think of what shape philosophy can take in the new century, we have to begin with the formations already laid down in the preceding one. These existing formations prescribe the problems for the new generations from amongst which we have to choose our formations in view of our changing needs, the changing historical conditions, new scientific knowledge, fresh artistic experiments, and novel socio-political ideas. Let me begin with a brief overview of where philosophy stood at the beginning of the new century.

### **Twentieth-century Philosophy**

The most significant general outcome of the twentieth century, as far as philosophy is concerned, is a widespread realization that philosophy is a global discipline, and not merely a Western one. The nineteenth century had brought to the Western consciousness an exaggerated self-awareness—

accomplished and consolidated in the works of Hegel—that philosophy was the culmination of the Western self-consciousness, and that the Indian, the Chinese, and the African spirit did not reach the heights of conceptual thinking that philosophy demanded. This Hegelian judgment, articulated in 1807 in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, continues to exert its powerful hold on Western thought. In the thirties of the twentieth century, Edmund Husserl, in an influential lecture, affirmed that 'Western philosophy' was a tautologous notion, just as 'non-Western philosophy' was a self-contradictory idea, and talked about the 'Europeanization of the earth'. Husserl's protégé Martin Heidegger affirmed a similar thesis, with the redeeming feature that for him oriental thinking, if not philosophical, was a thinking of a high order, a non-objective thinking whose day had come with the 'destruction of Western metaphysics'. Various social, political, and philosophical undercurrents led in the last decades of the century to the subjugation of the Hegel-Husserl prejudice, and the spectacular rise of interest in global philosophy, in 'Philosophy, East and West'.

Using the occasion of various lectures, I have emphasized the need for a renewed, that is, revised, account of the history of consciousness—a revision of Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology*. But this is a task still to be undertaken.

Although 'global philosophy' is being talked about, few of its proponents have taken steps to actualize it. There is a certain contradiction in the idea—if that is how 'global philosophy' is to be understood—of a system to be subscribed to around the world, for any such system would amount to being a dogmatic one, much like Marxism was in the communist world, and would no more deserve to be called a genuinely free exercise in thinking. Authentic global philosophy has to be a 'global conversation' demanding from its participants a genuine 'give and take', and not merely taking part in global conferences. In the light of this global demand on philosophy, we can return to more specific concerns as they have emerged.

### Fundamental Concepts and Concerns

As I look back at twentieth-century philosophy, I find two major *concepts* and two major *dimensions*: these two criss-cross and overlap. The two con-

cepts—each generating both a method and a substantive field—are *language* and *consciousness*. Linguistic philosophy and consciousness-philosophies are the two major methodologically and thematically differentiated possibilities realized in the past century. The two dimensions I have in mind are the *theoretical* and the *practical*, which were separated in Western thought ever since Aristotle. The separation was reaffirmed by Kant, but was finally sought to be overcome by Hegel and Marx. All philosophical problems were reduced to problems of language by Wittgenstein and other succeeding logical positivists and analytic philosophers. Likewise, all philosophical problems were reduced to questions about consciousness by Husserl. Just as the former group of philosophers studied, in great detail, the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of language, Husserl and the phenomenologists likewise researched the structure of consciousness—its intentionality, temporality, and intersubjectivity in particular. Results of these researches are amongst the more enduring accomplishments of philosophy.

By the end of the century it was becoming increasingly clear that the mutual opposition, even animosity between these major philosophical schools needed to be rejected in favour of cooperation. Language and consciousness implied each other; between them a common field was being demarcated by the 'language of consciousness' and by consciousness of speech. But a field of enquiry that emerged jointly from both may be defined by the two inter-involving concepts of *intentionality* and *meaning*. Both language and consciousness are *about* the world, and both refer to the world through a layer of meanings generated through a process that is historical (new meanings are built on old ones), and are intersubjectively available. Philosophy of culture is now possible on this basis. *Culture* may be defined as sedimented meanings. Being intersubjective, social, and historical, consciousness and its formations may be called 'spirit' (*Geist*). Hegel seems pre-eminently relevant now. The Hegelian *Geist* seems to comprehend the opposition between language and consciousness. Exactly

*The Thinking Soul*



GIRIJA KALYANA RAO

two-hundred years after the appearance of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, we in 2007 are in a situation when its relevance is more pertinent than ever before. It also promises to comprehend the opposition between the theoretical and the practical.

### Theory and Practice

Never before were thinking people yearning more for a practical realization of pure theoretical thinking. Young people in the US as well as in Europe ask philosophers of what practical use their theories are. What bearing do they have on such questions as peace and ecology? The concern is not so much about how to apply theory to practical life, a question which we do not understand very well, but this: Is there a mode of philosophical thinking which by itself carries practical implications?

We need to avoid two approaches which have already been tried: reducing theory to practice and reducing practice to theory. The former leads to pragmatism and Marxism; both take truth to be successful practice. The latter is best exemplified by the logic of action—deontic logic and its kind—which abounds in contemporary logic. Both fail to satisfy the hunger for a theory which is practically oriented. Here we have other models to emulate: the Chinese, the Indian, and the Aristotelian. Can philosophy successfully return to these and practise a theoretical thinking which, without sacrificing its theoretical rigour, becomes practically efficacious?

It has to be pointed out that there is no self-evident, obvious, and common measure of practicality. Whether a theory is practically useful or not depends upon the goal being entertained and the value that is determining the ordering of goals, both of which, again, are dependent upon the interpretation one confers on oneself, and on life and its meaning.

### Position of Indian Philosophy

In all the aforementioned respects, Indian philosophy has the potentiality of being a source of new ideas in this century.

First of all, throughout its history, right from

very ancient times, Indian thinking was polarized between 'language' and 'consciousness', even as attempts were being made to mediate between them. For this occasion, I need only recall the contrast between *śabdādvaita* of Bhartrihari ('all knowledge is penetrated by language, *śabda* *anuviddham*') and the pure Advaita of Shankara (pure consciousness is untouched by language). The Buddhist view that true perception is non-linguistic and the Hindu theories which distinguish between two stages of knowledge—*nirvikalpaka* (indeterminate) and *savikalpaka* (determinate)—sought to mediate between them.

Secondly, when thinking about *śabda*, one needs to recall its various levels, beginning with the externalized, audible sound (*dhvani*) and the more and more internalized, inaudible *śabda*, gradually reaching an identification with the cosmic reality at the root of all things. One needs also to take into account the theory of *sphota*, which modern Western semantic theory recognized only in its surface aspect as the word-type (as distinguished from the word-token), and the grammarian's understanding of the rule-governed nature of transformational deep grammar.

Indian thought can boldly encounter the challenge of the Western linguistic (syntactical and semantic) philosophies as also the invitation of transcendental phenomenology to exhibit how mundane entities and the world are constituted in pure consciousness. At the same time, Indian thinking about consciousness has to appropriate from the West lessons about the temporality of consciousness (as reflected in the thoughts of Bergson, James, and Husserl) and the historicity of existence (Hegel and Heidegger).

### Mundane Philosophy

Linguistic philosophy and 'consciousness philosophy' are both transcendental philosophies. They advance theories about how the world comes to be constituted. Both language and consciousness, in different ways, constitute and present the world.

Besides transcendental philosophy, there is also

mundane philosophy, which concerns itself with areas of the world as thematized in the various sciences: physics thematizes physical nature; psychology, human mind; biology, living beings. Accordingly, philosophy of physics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of biology are important parts of philosophy, especially as it developed in the twentieth century. Their importance has grown with the unprecedented development of the sciences and their application in technology.

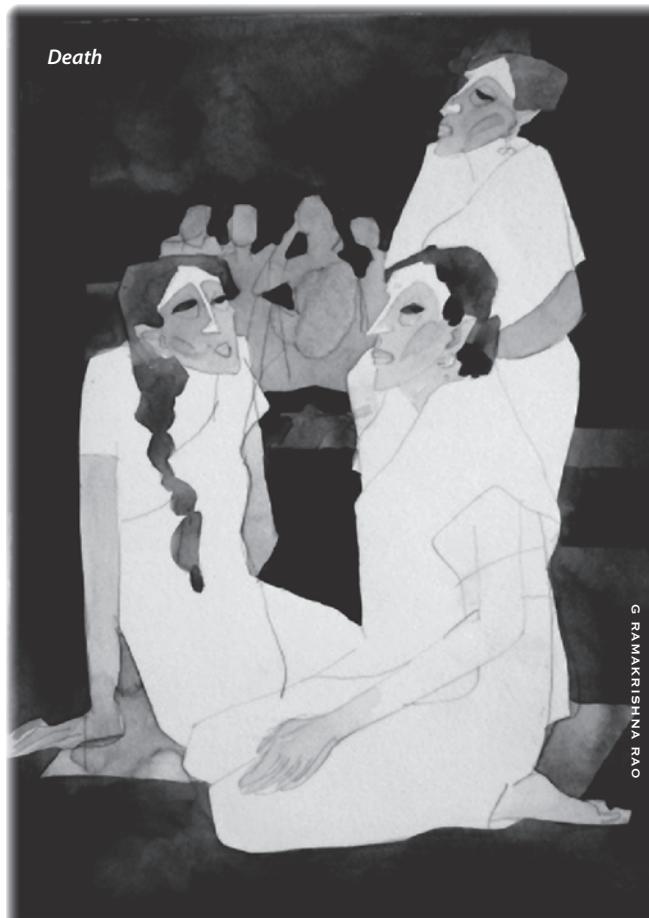
A dominant trend in all these developments has been *one sort of reductionism or another*. Mind is reduced to body, consciousness to neural processes, life to bodily processes of complex organizational sorts, and so on. All this is encouraged by the widespread and hitherto unimagined growth of computers, of information science, of neurobiology and cell biology, of medicine and surgical technologies. But philosophically, reductionism still remains unsatisfactory, especially from the phenomenological point of view. We want to recognize the uniqueness of consciousness and of life as emergent properties in the evolutionary process, all of which are rooted though in material nature. As the physicist Schrödinger once said, the discovery about producing fire by rubbing stones does not establish the origin of fire, it only gives access to how to produce fire within the limited context of home and hearth. Neural processes may be responsible for the emergence of limited human conscious states, but it is quite another thing to claim that consciousness itself is a product of matter.

A much more plausible step is one in which all mundane sciences are reduced to information-processing. A philosophical understanding of ‘information’ and its dissemination may be helpful when we understand information beyond the limits of Shannon’s limited theory. This might get tied up with the integration of quantum-mechanics into our world-view.

Let me conclude by emphasizing a branch of mundane philosophy that is of great importance for us as humans living in societies. It is the emergence of the idea of *globalization* in economics,

combined with the realization amongst wealthy nations that widespread poverty around the world needs global cooperation to be eradicated. Free flow of information has helped globalization, but the uneven field of power sometimes accentuates wealth in one area and poverty in another. Political self-governance is being upset by the power of international companies. Local producers are put under pressure by those from wealthier countries. Local cultures are being threatened to extinction by more powerful cultures from richer countries. A proper balance is needed between the two: globalization and localization. Gandhi’s Swadeshi needs to be harmonized with Tagore’s universalism. Just as the distance between communism and capitalism is being shortened by developing a new political philosophy which will transcend both Karl Marx and Adam Smith, so also the new philosophy needs to reconcile the global and the local.

These are some of the challenges to philosophy in the twenty-first century, as I perceive it today. ☺



## REFLECTIONS ON PHILOSOPHY

# Philosophy of Language in the Vaiyakarana Tradition

Dr Kapil Kapoor

THE Indian mind has been incessantly reflecting on the nature and structure of language, its relationship to the world it talks about, and its organization as a system. The deliberations of the Sanskrit grammarians (*vaiyākaranas*) began with phonetics and ended in philosophy. It has been said that the grammarians went to the sea-shore in search of cowrie-shells (the sounds of language) and ended up finding a pearl (in the form of *śabda-brahman*).

### The Indian Conception of Language

That language is central to India's intellectual history is established by the attested existence of a long tradition of thinking.<sup>1</sup> As knowledge is the supreme path to what in the later Indian world view got defined as the ultimate end or goal of human life, moksha—liberation from suffering here and now,<sup>2</sup> and as knowledge is inseparable from language,<sup>3</sup> language has understandably been the central object of inquiry, and has come in for sustained and intense investigation in all Indian schools of thought. It has been studied in its two aspects—the ontological, *svarūpa*, and the epistemological, *sāmarthyā*, both as the object of knowledge and as means of knowledge. In a remarkable analogy, Bhartrihari compares *śabda*, word, with a *dīpaka*, lamp (1.44)—when it is lighted, it reveals itself and also reveals other associated objects (meanings)—it is the object to be grasped (*grāhya*) and the means of grasping objects (*grāhaka*).

The Indian conception of language differs in three ways from the Western:

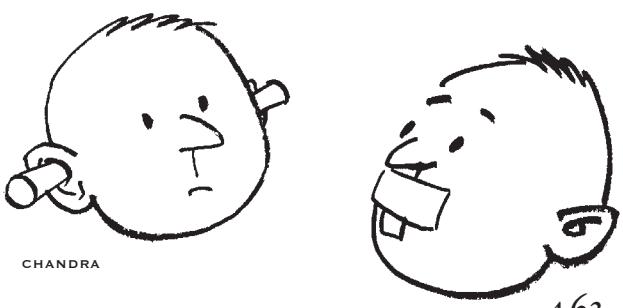
- (i) language is speech, not writing (script);
- (ii) language is a cognitive system (not, primarily, a means of communication); and

(iii) language is a constructivist system (not a representational one).

All the three Sanskrit words for language—*bhāṣā*, *vāk*, and *vāñi*—denote the ‘sound-ness’ of language. *Bhāṣā* is from the verb-root *bhāṣ*, which means ‘articulated sound’; *vāk* is from the verb root *vac*, which means ‘to say something’; *vāñi* is from the verb root *vāñ*, which means ‘to say something sweetly’. The most significant effect of this notion of language was the rise of phonetics as the first science in India and the sophisticated phonetic analyses achieved in the tradition. Panini's grammar is also founded on these assumptions. It is a grammar of *bhāṣā*, spoken language, of the acceptable forms of speech. Even while deriving *vaidikī*, compositional language, its goal is to establish its spoken forms. For this reason, *sandhi*, the euphonic combination of sounds seen in speech contexts, has an important place in this grammar. No other grammar deals with *sandhi* in this exhaustive a manner or with such systematic rigour.

Further, as speech rests in a speaking human voice, and because the source of an utterance is always identifiable as an individual consciousness, no truth-claim is asserted about what is said. The speaking voice is an individual voice and not the

*Language is cognition, not communication*



Voice. In Hindu thought, unlike Hebraic, there is no one God and there is no one Voice. This enables a multiplicity of viewpoints, *dṛṣṭi bheda*: ‘*ekatvināṁ dvaitināṁ ca pravādā bahudhā matāḥ*; the assumptions of monists and dualists have given rise to many viewpoints’ (1.8).

This fact is linked to the second postulate: language is a cognitive system and not just a system of communication, as modern linguists—barring Chomsky—will have us believe. As explicated by Bhartrihari, language is the form that knowledge takes; and therefore language is indistinguishable from intelligence (*samjnā*) and consciousness (*cetanā*) (1.126). What *vyākaranā* or grammar studies and describes is *sphota-śabda*, the ‘language in the mind’, the system that is shared by all speakers of that particular language. Therefore, when Bhartrihari isolates the properties of language, such as its non-partitiveness (*a-vibhāga*) and non-sequentiality (*a-krama*) or the processes of conceptualization and expression (1.46), he is making a statement about the nature and process of cognition (in the human mind). We are informed by him that while the phoneticists consider *śabda* (language) as sound (*dhvani*) and the Jains consider language as *pudgala* (atomic), the grammarians hold that language is the *vivarta* (apparent transformation) of knowledge (*jñāna*) subsisting in the inner knowing self (*āntaro jñātā*) (1.107–112). Conversely, *śabda*, when grasped, results in knowledge subsisting in the inner knowing self, this time of the hearer.

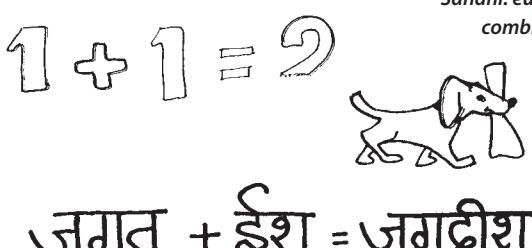
Third, language is a constructivist system. As all cognition (*bodha*) takes the form of language, the reality that is cognized by us is necessarily a linguistic construct. Language is not a system that ‘names’ some pre-existing reality, as was the claim of the

representational view of language before Saussure and Derrida ‘happened’ under the influence of Sanskrit thought. The constructivist view asserts that language constructs the reality that we claim to be ‘out there’. The grammarians say that it is through naming that objects, both outside the mind and inside, are cognized as separate or different from each other,<sup>4</sup> creating for us *iti āmnāya*, ‘this enumerable universe’ (1.120).

### Bhartrihari: the Grand Synthesist

These assumptions about the nature of language inspired a long line of thinking about the relationship between language, thought, and reality, and culminated in Bhartrihari’s grand synthesis of the tradition in his *Vakyapadiya*.

The three divisions of language—substance, form, and the potential of words to denote/connote—are respectively studied as phonetics, grammar, and the philosophy of word-meaning, under the two aspects of object (*grāhya*) and means (*grāhaka*).<sup>5</sup> It is possible to see, in the long tradition of linguistic reflection, a growing understanding of the nature of meaning: from the *vaidika* concept of *śabda* as a potent sound with power to create or destroy, to the etymologists’ notion of *śabda* as something that has a meaning grounded within a particular discourse, to the Buddhist requirement of locating meaning outside the text, in the consciousness of the predicator, to the Mimamsaka argument—in consonance with their liturgical purpose—that meaning is the action or performance enjoined, to the Naiyayika position that words refer to objects, *vastu* or *artha*, to, finally, the grand synthesis articulated by Bhartrihari—meaning is something constituted in the mind and then related, variously, to an outside object in *uktī*, application. A cline of references is set up by Bhartrihari: *sphoṭārtha* (conceptual meaning) → *śabdārtha* (verbal meaning) → *vācyārtha* (expressed meaning) → *bauddhārtha* ([mentally] grasped meaning) → *vāstvārtha* (referential meaning). This is how meaning, as determined by a number of conditions and factors of use,<sup>6</sup> is constructed in usage, *uktī*.



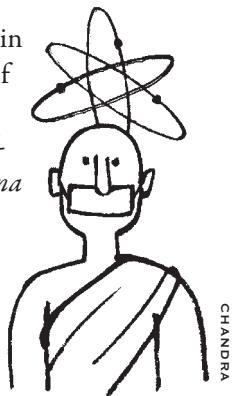
We may restate here the growing understanding in this debate. The Rig Vedic etymologies (e.g. *√usas* → *uṣā*) illustrate the etymological view of word-meaning. For the phoneticists, with their assumption of sound being ontologically cosmic, *śabda* as a sound-aggregate has the cosmic power to create and destroy. On the other hand, Kautsa, a materialist sceptic, argued that Vedic mantras are meaningless—they are marked by tautology, contradiction, opacity, and impossibility, among other things.<sup>7</sup> The etymologist Yaska countered the two challenges: (i) that of the phoneticists, who said that mere enunciation of hymns is efficacious, by upholding the primacy of knowledge and dismissing their disregard of meaning (1.18), and (ii) of the materialist sceptics, by rejecting their position and arguing in substance that no utterance is meaningless, that there are degrees of opacity, identified by him as various textual indices, and that these can be handled by a system of determination of meaning (1.16–17, 2.1), a system that finally matured as the Mimamsa system. The Mimamsa commentator Shabaraswami continued this tradition by taking the position that words (or utterances) in a text have exactly the same meaning that they have in actual usage and therefore their meaning is to be fixed by reference to usage.

The etymologists' assumption of a determinable meaning is questioned by the Buddhists. From the perspective of their foundational principles of flux and momentariness, words are merely names for momentary mental impressions of momentary objects. They question Yaska's concept of textual meaning and ask: what relationship actually obtains between the *word* and the *world*? They say that words are names for constantly changing objects. This is most evident in the use of proper names—we continue to call a person by the same word/name from childhood to old age, though he or she undergoes visible and substantial changes over time. Every individual, including the speaker and the hearer, thus constructs objects whose reference can be grasped only by exclusion, by isolating them from other objects, by negation.

This is a method already in use in the Upanishads. The method of 'neti neti, not this, not this' has been used, for example, in an effort to define Brahman in the *Kena Upanishad*.<sup>8</sup>

The Mimamsakas are aware that Vedic mantras are differently, even contradictorily, interpreted<sup>9</sup> and that this is the ground for the Buddhist correlation between the flux in meaning of Vedic language and the impossibility of categorical knowledge (of reality). Therefore they characterize the language of Vedic hymns as metaphorical, *rūpaka*.<sup>10</sup> How do we then determine meaning? Mimamsa suggests principles such as coherence, sequence, type-token relationship between the expresser and the expressed, and conformity to usage. Meaning is in the act, and therefore the focus is on injunctive sentences (unlike the Vedanta focus on declarative sentences). The Mimamsakas set up the principles of 'metarule', *ekavākyatā* (syntactic unity), and *ekārthibhāva* (semantic unity) for interpretation of utterances. Patanjali (c. 2nd cent. BCE), indirectly characterizes meaning as a mental construct by defining *śabda* as 'that which when articulated brings to the hearer's mind the cognition of an object'.<sup>11</sup>

Bhartrihari is the great synthesizer in this tradition that includes the Rig Veda as well as Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*. He understands meaning as an abstract mental entity, *sphoṭa*, somewhat like the mental construct of the Buddhists, which gets related to the outer object when its analogous word is used to denote the object.<sup>12</sup> Because of its nature as *mānasa vyāpāra* (mental activity), meaning is highly variable, depending as it does on individual cognition. The mapping of the denotation is mediated by the speaker's *vivaksā* (intention). For the hearer also, meaning is something figuring in the mind. For both the speaker and the hearer, the cognitive constitution of meaning rests on given conditions and factors (see note 6).



In Jain theory, language is atomic (pudgala)

### Language, Meaning, and Reality

The relationship between language and reality is the core issue in the theory of meaning. In the celebrated Mahayana text *Lankavatara-sutra*, 'the Bodhisattva Mahasattva said this to the Blessed One: "Pray tell me ... the signification of two things, expression and expressed ... for the purification of all beings."'<sup>13</sup>

One answer to this question comes from Sanskrit literature. Kalidasa, in the very first *śloka* of his epic *Raghuvamsha*, says:

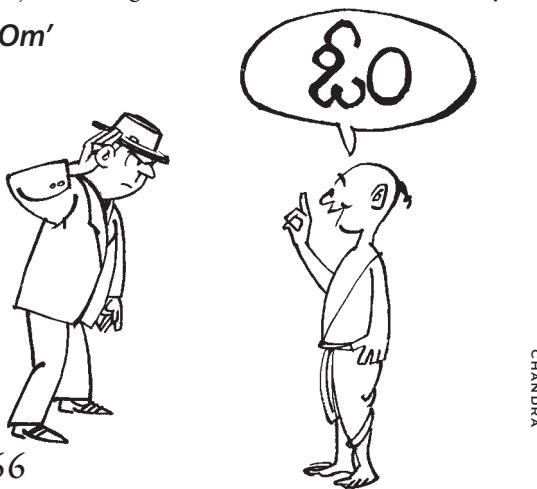
*Vāgarthāviva sampṛktau vāgartha-pratipattaye;  
Jagataḥ pitarau vande pārvatī-parameśvarau.*

For the right understanding of words and their meanings, I bow down to Parvati and Parameshwara, the parents of the universe, the perpetual relation between whom is as intimate as that between words and their meanings.

It is the relationship of *nāma* (name, conception) and *rūpa* (form, physical object) that is *nitya*, perpetual. We go to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* for the categories of *nāma* and *rūpa*: 'This universe, before coming into being, was unmanifest (*avyakta*). It became manifest (*vyakta*) through the conjunction of *nāma* (construct) and *rūpa* (form). ... Therefore, even at this time this unmanifest object becomes manifest (gets expressed) as "has this *nāma* and this *rūpa*".'<sup>14</sup>

The Buddhist Vaibhashika system also characterizes objects as having the dimensions of *rūpa* and *nāma*. *Rūpa* is defined as that through which objects are figured out. It is further derivatively de-

'Om'



fined as that which takes a form, i.e. objects or entities that occupy physical space or space in the mind. It is understood that the empirical world is constituted of *nāma*, name, and *rūpa*, form/entity. While 'form' denotes 'matter' or 'determinate entity', 'name' refers to the configuration in the mind. Buddhism identifies these two dimensions (*rūpa* and *nāma*) of all objects that come into being as pertaining to matter (*bhautika*) and awareness (*cetanā*) respectively. *Rūpa* being *bhautika* belongs to the domain of senses (*indriya*) and the objects of senses (*viṣaya*). *Nāma* being *caitasika* belongs to the domain of feeling/experience (*vedanā*), intelligence (*saṃjñā*), ingrained impressions (*samskāra*), and reasoning (*vijnāna*).

*Sabda* (language/word) encompasses *nāma*. Whether it incorporates *rūpa* also and, if yes, to what extent, is a subject of inquiry. The relationship of these two dimensions to the totality or complete knowledge of the object is also a major subject of inquiry in the problem of relationship between language and reality.<sup>15</sup>

The status of the phenomenal world in relation to language is an important problem in the theory of meaning. As the *Lankavatara-sutra* says, the Brahmanas and Shramanas predicate 'existence' on the basis of linguistic usage, while in fact existence and non-existence are both constructs of the mind:

In all things there is no self-nature, words too are devoid of reality ... the ignorant and the simple-minded [are] not knowing that the world is what is seen of Mind itself ... Blessed One, the philosophers explain birth from being and non-being, while, according to the Blessed One, all things coming into existence from nothingness pass away by causation ... As space, the hare's horns, and a barren woman's child are non-entities except as expressed in words, so is this existence imagined. ... For this reason, Mahāmati, the error-existence (or this world of illusion) is not, but as this water is manifest to other people it is not a non-existence either. ... when the world is understood to be nothing but Mind itself, the existence and non-existence of external objects ceases to be discriminated ... Thus, Mahāmati, this error being

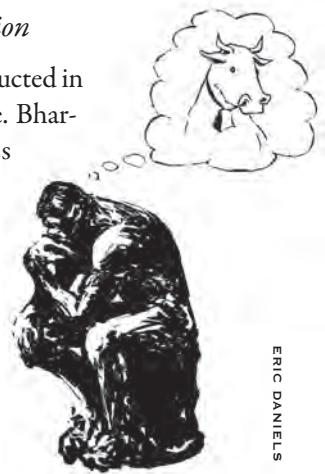
discriminated by the wise turns into *tathatā* (suchness) ... *Māyā* is something imagined and clung to as having multitudinousness of individual forms. ... When the state of imagelessness is recognised, objects ... cease to assert themselves. ... *Citta* is bound up with the objective world; the intellect's function is to speculate; and in the excellent state of imagelessness there is the evolving of transcendental wisdom (*prajñā*). ... Where there is false imagination multitudinousness of things is recognized. ... As far as the duality of being and non-being extends, there is the realm of intellection; when this realm vanishes, intellection completely ceases. When the external world is not grasped (as real) there is neither causation nor reality; there is the essence of suchness (*tathatā*), which is the (spiritual) realm of the wise.<sup>16</sup>

The continuity of thought from this Buddhist construction to the Yoga theory of cognition to Bhartrihari's integral theory is self-evident. Bhartrihari achieves a characteristically Indian synthesis and says that the meaning of a word in relation to the phenomenal world is determinable only in its application (*ukti*). When a word is used, its conceptual world constructs the external object through imposition (*āropa*), and in this sense all this world (*jagat*) is a linguistic construct (*vikalpa*).

In the tradition of the grammarians, the word is something 'which when articulated brings to the hearer's mind the cognition of an object'. So all meaning rests in the mind—is *buddhi viṣaya*. The reality we talk about is in fact constructed by us (and by the hearer) in the sense that in verbal usage, both designation and reception are mental constructs. Bhartrihari says, the word is imposed on the object: 'that is this' = 'that is a cow'.<sup>17</sup> It is not the object that identifies the word; the object is in fact defined/recognized in terms of the word. The word, cow, for example, has an associated image in the speaker's mind, which is mapped on to the object when the word is applied to the object. And the hearer also has a mental image of 'cow', which is matched with the object. This becomes clear when we consider the use of a familiar word for an absent object or for an unfamiliar object; in either case, the

object is evidently constructed in terms of a mental image. Bhartrihari has this process in mind when he says: 'The meaning/object is something mental (*buddhivisaya*), but it rests on an external object and is looked upon as meaning when it is externalized' (2.132).

'That is this' = 'That is a cow'



In one of its hymnal reflections, the Rig Veda codes an ancient conception: 'Language cuts forms in the ocean of reality'.<sup>18</sup> Reality, like water in the ocean, is sequenceless, non-discrete, and continuous, and the difference (*bheda*) that we recognize in the phenomenal world, the multiple varied external reality that we cognize, is a construct, *śabdasya pariṇāma*.<sup>19</sup> This extraordinary multiplicity, our knowledge of this phenomenal world, is of the nature of *vikalpa* (1.119), in the precise sense that this term is used in the Yoga theory of knowledge,<sup>20</sup> there being virtually no cognitive distinction between non-existent entities such as 'rabbit-horns' and perceptible entities such as a jar or a piece of cloth.<sup>21</sup> Language designates these objects not as they are in their totality but as they are constituted at the level of appearance (*prātibhāsika*), which is the level of *bhedā* or differences. Complete understanding of the object may never be reached and may not, in fact, be expressible in words. Just as we proceed in our understanding of reality from the *prātibhāsika* (apparent) through the *vyāvahārika* (empirical) to a true understanding of the *pāramārthika* (ultimate) reality, in the same way, in the grasp of meaning, we progress from the denotation of the particular, via the universal qualified by the particular, to the denotation of one universal existence, *sattā* (3.1.19, 29, 33).

In Indian philosophy, the total reality of an object is a complex matrix of no less than eleven properties which can be affirmed positively or negatively

about the object in question.<sup>22</sup> Complete knowledge of the object, *pūrṇa jnāna*, involves knowledge of how each of these categories is present in the given object (say, a jar, *ghaṭa*) and in what manner or degree.

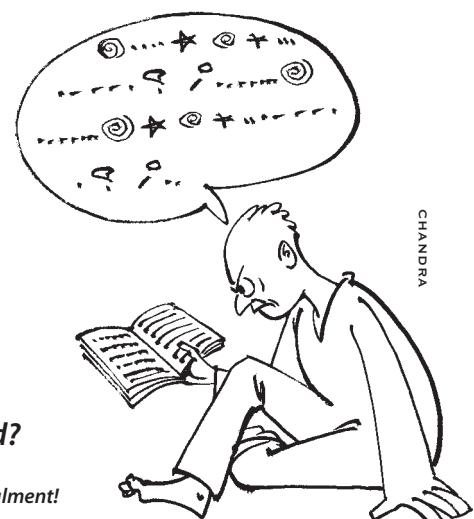
(To be concluded)

### Notes and References

1. The need to maintain the Vedic textual knowledge was the original impulse for linguistic studies. Maintenance of texts in the oral tradition depended on a complete understanding of (i) the phonetics of speech, and (ii) the morphology of continuous utterances (*sāmhitā*), which in turn depended on (iii) an understanding of the meaning of utterances/words. This accounts for the rise of the sciences of phonetics, grammar, and etymology (*nirukta*) respectively in the pre-Paninean period.
2. Bhagavadgītā, 4.38.
3. Bhartrihari, *Vakyapadiya*, 1.123. The *Vakyapadiya* citations in this article refer to the following volumes edited and translated by Subramania Sastri: *The Vakyapadiya of Bhartṛhari with the Vyṛtti*, chapter 1 (Poona: Deccan College, 1965); *The Vakyapadiya of Bhartṛhari*, chapter 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1977); *The Vakyapadiya of Bhartṛhari*, chapter 3, part 1 (Poona: Deccan College, 1971); *The Vakyapadiya of Bhartṛhari with the Prakīrṇa Prakāśa of Helaṛāja*; chapter 3, part 2 (Poona: Deccan College, 1971).
4. *Ghaṭa-paṭa bheda* (the difference between a jar and a cloth); *Vakyapadiya*, 1.118.
5. The science of etymology or exposition of words, *nirvacana*, is an interface discipline between phonetics, grammar, and meaning as it studies/fixes the meaning of words in terms of their derivation from given verb-roots, in the course of which the sound form undergoes changes.
6. ‘Connection, separation, association, opposition, meaning, context, the presence of another word, suitability, propriety, place, time, gender, accent, etc.—these are the means of our determining the meaning of a word when there is no definiteness about it’ (*Vakyapadiya*, 2.315–6).
7. See, *Nirukta*, 1.15.
8. *Kena Upanishad*, 1.3. The Jaina theory of *svaparyāya/para-paryāvāda* (self- and extraneous modification) also has some affinity with the Buddhist *apohavāda* (exclusion of the opposite), i.e. an entity or its meaning is defined not only in terms of what it is not, but also as what it is, a matrix of positive and negative features.
9. The *gāyatrī* and *cātvāri śrīṅga* mantras are cases in point.
10. *Mimamsa-sutra*, 1.2.11.
11. *Mahabhashya*, 1.1.
12. *Vakyapadiya*, 3.14.325.
13. *The Lankavatara Sutra: A Mahayana Text*, trans. D T Suzuki (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1932), 75.
14. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 1.4.7.
15. The *Yoga Sutra*, for example, posits the triad of *nāma*, *rūpa*, and *jñāna*.
16. *The Lankavatara Sutra*, 77–130.
17. *Vakyapadiya*, 2.128.
18. Rig Veda, 1.164.41.
19. *Vakyapadiya*, 1.120.
20. See *Yoga Sutra*, 1.6–9.
21. *Vakyapadiya*, 1.130.
22. (i) mutability (*utpāda*, *vyaya*, *dhrauvya*), (ii) transformation (*parināti*), (iii) state of the substance or constituent material (*avasthā*), (iv) attributes (*guṇa*), (v) action or tendencies (*kriyā*), (vi) own form (*svarūpa*), (vii) class (*jāti*), (viii) characteristic marker (*lakṣaṇa*), (ix) locus or substratum (*deśa*), (x) productive of sorrow or happiness (*kliṣṭākliṣṭa*), (xi) non-existence or negation (*abhāva*). See, K Kapoor, ‘Concept of Padārtha in Language and Philosophy’, in *William Jones Memorial Volume* (Pune: Deccan College, 1997).

**Confused?**

*wait for  
the next instalment!*



## REFLECTIONS ON PHILOSOPHY

# The Philosophy of Religion: From East to West and Back Again

Dr Jeffery D Long

Is there a God? Is there life after death? Do our lives have any meaning or purpose other than what we ourselves decide? Do we even have a free will? Is it possible to know the answers to any of these questions? How ought we to go about answering them, if at all? These are just a few of the questions explored by the philosophy of religion.

One might, of course, object that these questions are not limited to the philosophy of religion, but are fundamental to all forms of philosophy. One need not be religious in order to wonder if this universe has a cause other than itself, if our consciousness carries on after the death of the body, if it was somewhere before this body came to be, and so on. Nor does one need to turn to religion in order to seek the answers to these questions, though of course many do. The questions I have been raising relate to basic metaphysical issues. In other words, they are *ontological* questions. They inquire into the nature of existence as such.

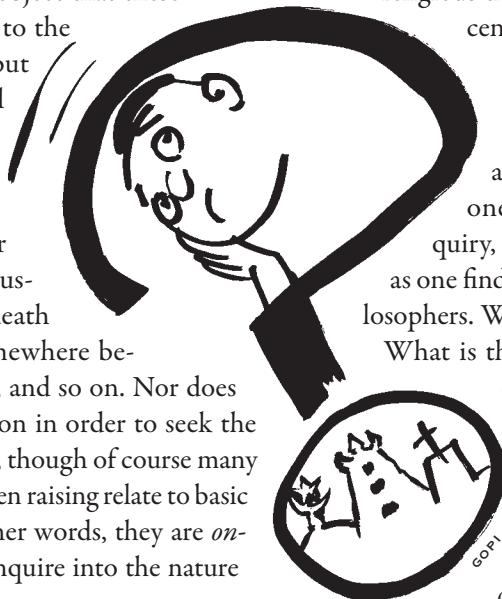
### From India to Greece and Back Again

Metaphysics—or ontology, as it is also known—is one of the oldest and most basic of philosophical inquiries. In the West, it is traced back to the Greeks, to pre-Socratic philosophers such as Pythagoras, Heraclitus, and Parmenides. Philosophy as such begins, at least on a Western understanding, with these thinkers, who were inquiring into the very nature of existence. As inquirers into the nature of existence, their pursuit of knowledge was

not altogether different from that of modern scientists, and indeed, the first Greek philosophers were also the first scientists. The contemporary divisions between the fields of knowledge, with the ‘objective’ physical world being studied by the sciences and the more ethereal realms of meaning and value being the exclusive preserve of philosophers and religious thinkers, did not arise for many centuries.

What was true of the ancient Greeks was also true for the ancient Indians. If one looks at the Upanishads, for example, one finds the same kinds of inquiry, and the same kinds of answers, as one finds in the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers. What is reality, at its most basic? What is that entity, knowing which, all other entities can be known? In both the extant writings of the ancient Greeks and in the Upanishads, one finds a variety of speculative answers to this question. Perhaps fire is the most fundamental of elements. Or perhaps it is earth, wind, or water. Or perhaps it is some mysterious reality that is not any of these. Parmenides speaks of Being Itself (*ontos*) as a unitary reality underlying all of the apparent change and variety of the phenomenal world, just as the anonymous sages of the Upanishads speak of Brahman.

In fact, one could make a case that the speculations of the ancient Greeks draw on those of the ancient Indians. The most ancient Vedantic texts, like the *Brihadaranyaka* and *Chhandogya*



Upanishads, predate the earliest pre-Socratic philosophers by several centuries. There are legends that the most renowned pre-Socratic, Pythagoras, visited India. Whether or not one gives credence to such tales, the clear imprint of Indic thought is visible upon his system. Pythagoras taught his followers vegetarianism, a type of meditation based on a system of sacred mathematics expressed both in sound and in a variety of geometric forms, and the doctrine of *metempsychosis*, or reincarnation. He is even said to have remembered his previous lives. His vegetarianism and belief in what in India is called *punarjanma*, or rebirth, and his teaching of a form of meditation (*dhyāna*) involving sound (*mantra*) and geometric form (*yantra*) are all strikingly Indic in nature.

Socrates himself, widely regarded as the father of Western philosophy, as well as his student, Plato, through whose works we know of Socrates and his teachings, displays a similar indebtedness to Indic thought, possibly through the medium of Pythagoras and the influence of his school on subsequent Greek intellectual developments. In the final chapter of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates offers a detailed account of the rebirth process, which has many affinities to Indic thought.

Probably most striking of all, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates presents an analogy of the soul as dwelling in the body like the rider in a chariot almost identical in its details to the analogy given by Yama, the Lord of Death, to Nachiketa in the *Katha Upanishad*.

The great twentieth-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once famously wrote: 'The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.'<sup>1</sup> Given the centrality of Plato and his master, Socrates, to the Western philosophical tradition, combined with the indebtedness of these thinkers to India that we can discern in their teachings, it is safe to say that metaphysics, in the traditional Western sense, really begins in India.

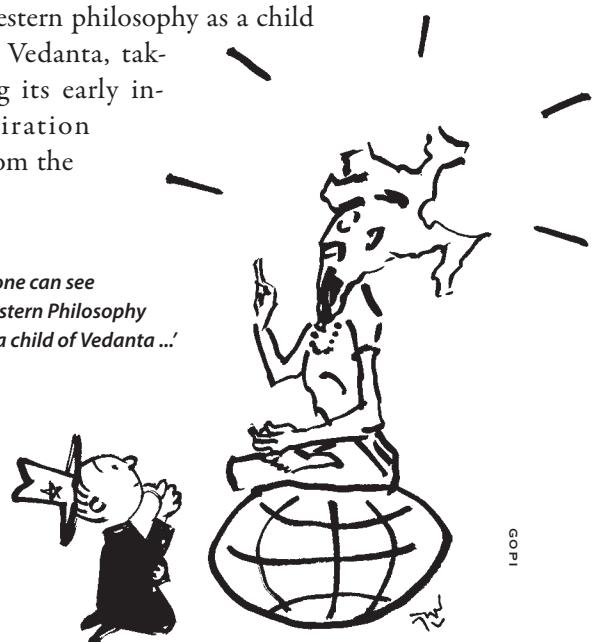
**Philosophy, Religion, and Science:** Our current distinction between 'philosophy' as a secular aca-

demic discipline and 'religion' as a matter of faith, of belief in the existence of unseen and unproven entities, clearly did not exist for the ancients, either in India or the West. For Socrates and for the sages of the Upanishads, the search for knowledge was inseparable from—and indeed, it was carried out in the service of—the search for the good life, for transcendence and spiritual liberation. Philosophy, for the ancients, was a form of spiritual practice.

The bifurcation of this originally holistic vision into the distinct and separate—and occasionally antagonistic—pursuits of 'religion', 'science', and 'philosophy' occurred in the West for a variety of reasons peculiar to the history of European thought. A similar distinction today obtains in India, due largely to Western influence, though a distinction between religion and philosophy—*dharma* and *darshana*—is not unknown in Indic thought.

My aim in this essay is to provide a brief overview of the philosophy of religion as it eventually emerged in the West, as a sub-field of philosophy, as well as to explore how this discipline might be reconfigured were it to be carried out from a Vedantic point of view. If philosophy really did begin in—or at least take its initial impetus from—India, I could be said to be travelling in this essay from India to the West and back again. If one can see Western philosophy as a child of Vedanta, taking its early inspiration from the

*'If one can see  
Western Philosophy  
as a child of Vedanta ...'*



Upanishads (albeit indirectly), I shall experiment here with bringing that child back home.

### **Historical Background of the Philosophy of Religion**

How did philosophy, originally a holistic enterprise, a spiritual path encompassing what we now know as both religious practice and the scholarly pursuit of knowledge, come to be identified exclusively with the second of these two activities? For the answer we must turn to a third geographic location, having already looked at India and Greece: Jerusalem.

The rise of Christianity in the West was the first of two major cultural shifts that served as historical catalysts for the emergence of a distinct discipline of the philosophy of religion, the second being the rise of modernity in Europe in the centuries following the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation.

If, for the ancient philosophers, the observation of and reflection upon the natural world, the realm of our experience, was a source of spiritually liberating knowledge, for the early Christians, such observation and reflection was decisively subordinate to divine revelation, in the form of the Bible and the traditions of the church. A major question with which the early fathers of the church wrestled quite sincerely was the relationship of secular knowledge to sacred church teaching. Was it appropriate to study or to otherwise utilize the teachings of pre-Christian, 'pagan' authors such as Plato and Aristotle? Did these writers and their methods of attaining and evaluating knowledge have anything to offer to the believing Christian? Should their works be appropriated in the service of the church? Or, as 'pagan' authors, should their works be viewed with suspicion, or rejected as the work of the devil?

A range of views on this issue was entertained among the early church fathers, with the consensus of the tradition eventually coming down on the side of the view that God has given human beings the ability to reason, and that we should use this

gift, albeit in a way that is ultimately subordinate to divine truth as revealed in church teaching. As eventually formulated in the Middle Ages by the great Catholic philosopher St Thomas Aquinas, the view was that reason—philosophy—can tell us a great deal, but that faith in the teaching of the church is needed to answer the deepest questions of existence.

Consequently, secular philosophy, inquiry such as that carried out by Plato and Aristotle, became an acceptable and even praiseworthy pursuit. The ancients could even be an aid to faith, as when Aquinas utilized Aristotle's argument for the existence of God, an argument that eventually became standardized as the 'cosmological argument' (that all things require a cause, that an infinite regression of causes is not acceptable, and that, therefore, there must be a first, uncaused cause, which is God). But where the writings of the ancients came into conflict with church dogma—such as in Plato's writings on rebirth—then it was church dogma that was to be followed, not the philosophy of the ancients.

**Philosophical Theology:** The medieval period, then, one could say, marked the emergence of the discipline of the philosophy of religion in a form also known as *philosophical theology*. Theology, a discipline closely related to philosophy in its method, begins in the Christian tradition as the attempt to reflect upon and determine the implications of religious faith. It is, to use the classic definition of another great medieval Christian thinker, St Anselm, *fides quaerens intellectum*, or 'faith seeking understanding'. Like philosophy, it is a rational enterprise. But it generally operates within the parameters of a pre-given view of reality provided by the claims of a religious tradition, which it can both critique and defend.

Philosophical theology, one could say, is the attempt to discern which religious claims can be verified on the basis of reason alone. Aquinas claimed, for example, that one could prove the existence of God—a first, uncaused cause of all other causes—using Aristotle's argument, without recourse

to any prior religious faith or text. But to know the precise nature of God in more detail—that God is a trinity, for example, or that the second member of this Trinity, God the Son, became incarnate as Jesus Christ and died for the sins of the world—requires the supernatural revelation provided by the church; for such claims are not deducible through reason alone.

So the philosophy of religion, in its incarnation as philosophical theology, begins as the attempt to discover what we can know about the ultimate object of religion—God—purely through natural reason, without recourse to supernatural revelation.

Historically, this carving out of a space in which rational inquiry could be pursued without any recourse to scripture or church teaching—to supernatural revelation—had one important unintended consequence. It eventually contributed to the rise of modernity, in which autonomous reason alone, reflecting on experience, rather than religious dogma, is the standard by which all truth claims are judged.

**Philosophy about Religion:** As the church fragmented due to the Protestant Reformation, with many differing interpretations of Christian dogma being held by warring parties, many thinkers longed for a standard of knowledge that was uncontested, a standard within the verifiable realm of empirical experience and rational thought. The success of the scientific method further accelerated the movement toward a universal standard of rational knowledge and away from the contestable realm of religious belief, which seemed increasingly to be subjective and beyond verification—a widely held view in the West to the present day.

In the modern period, therefore, the philosophy of religion became increasingly bold and speculative, but also more sceptical. No longer confined to the narrow field of philosophical theology—of determining what can be known about God by natural reason alone, but presupposing the basic truth of the Christian revelation—religious and sceptical thinkers alike could turn their attention to issues traditionally regarded as off limits. So

metaphysical thinkers freely speculated about the ultimate nature of reality, with Spinoza and Leibniz, for example, developing elaborate metaphysical systems with the ultimate goal of explaining *everything*, just as the ancients did. Similarly, sceptical thinkers such as Voltaire and David Hume could question whether religion itself had any validity, or was merely a human construct, a by-product of our hopes and fears. From speculations such as these arose the modern discipline of the study of religion. Philosophy of religion in this sense becomes not ‘religious philosophy’—philosophy seeking to answer the same questions normally posed by religion about the nature of God and the universe. Instead, it becomes philosophy ‘about religion’. Presupposing a sceptical answer to the more traditional questions, it seeks to understand what religion is and why people believe in it.

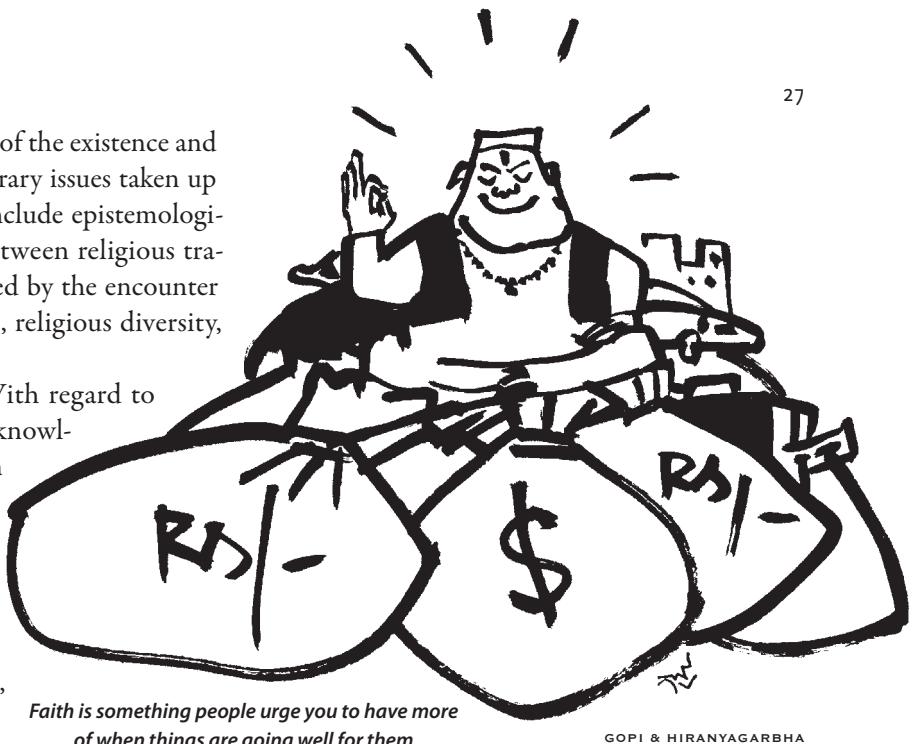
### ***Issues Explored by Contemporary Philosophers of Religion***

Contemporary philosophers of religion in the West are of all of the types suggested above and explore an enormous range of issues. There are philosophers of religion who are deeply religious people, committed to a particular tradition and seeing their work as being ultimately in the service of that tradition, even though, because they are philosophers and not theologians, that work itself is of a more general nature that can also be appreciated by those who do not share the philosopher’s religious convictions in their totality. So, for example, a philosopher might devote considerable effort to proving the existence of God without revealing that she is a Christian; and, since her arguments are of a general and not a tradition-specific nature, other theistic thinkers might also accept their validity, or at least find them worthy of examination. There are also philosophers of religion who do not have any particular religious commitment and may even be quite sceptical about religion, but who nevertheless have a strong interest in questions of a religious nature, or questions about religion itself, that they pursue in their philosophical work.

Besides the perennial issue of the existence and nature of God, the contemporary issues taken up by philosophers of religion include epistemological questions, the relation between religious tradition and reason, issues raised by the encounter between religion and science, religious diversity, and feminism.

**Validity of Truth Claims:** With regard to epistemology—the study of knowledge—the ultimate question is of course the basis of one's truth claims. How would one know, for example, that God does or does not exist? This is the issue of what is called, in the Indic traditions, *pramāṇa*, or the basis upon which one makes judgments about what is true. A topic of great interest to many philosophers of religion is the question of the validity of religious experience as a basis for belief. How reliable is such experience? Are claims of paranormal events, such as near-death experiences, a valid basis for making a judgment about religious claims? A related issue is, of course, the nature of knowledge itself; and questions of epistemology lead easily into broader questions about the very nature of consciousness and experience.

**Reason and Faith:** Postmodern thinkers have raised a variety of questions with regard to the nature of reason itself. The modern faith that reason reflecting on experience is an incontestable guide to truth, a faith bolstered in early modernity by the successes of science, has been, ironically, undermined by science's ongoing success. When our paradigm, our model for understanding reality, can shift as radically as scientific paradigms have since the rise of modern science, how reliable is any knowledge that we claim to have? And is knowledge ultimately separable from questions of value? The horrors of the two world wars and the ongoing threat of nuclear annihilation have led many to challenge the notion that reason is sufficient to save humanity from its self-created evils. This has opened up a space in the



*Faith is something people urge you to have more of when things are going well for them*

GOPI & HIRANYAGARBHA

philosophy of religion for thinkers to revisit what would have at one time been widely seen as outdated, traditionalist positions. Perhaps faith in a scripture is not so irrational after all, if faith in reason itself cannot be rationally defended, but is also itself a form of faith. Perhaps even reason requires a tradition, a framework of presupposed ideas and methods, in order to function. Is not science itself a kind of tradition?

**Religion and Science:** The relationship between religion and science is also an ongoing source of new inspiration for philosophers of religion. According to at least one prominent interpretation, science has gradually eroded religious faith as it has slowly done away with the necessity of God in order to explain an ever-widening array of phenomena. Now that consciousness itself has become an object of study to neuroscientists, is there any place for that most basic of religious concepts, the soul? Can religion be re-articulated in such a way as to retain its relevance in an age of science while retaining its power to inspire and reassure? Or is it doomed to vanish, or to transform beyond recognition? Or has science really challenged religion at all? Perhaps science and religion are talking past one another, one occupied with the realm of fact,

the other with the realm of meaning. Philosophers of religion have given a variety of differing answers to each of these questions.

**Religious Diversity:** This is an area that philosophers of religion have also been seeking to address, and it is to this area that my own work as a philosopher has been devoted.

The main concern raised by religious diversity is the question of the truth of any particular religious worldview. A challenge to all religions—to religion as such—is the fact that there is not the uniformity among religious truth-claims that there is in other areas of knowledge, such as science. It does not matter whether a physicist or a biologist is Indian or African or American or European, Hindu or Christian or Muslim or Buddhist: the laws of physics or the principles of biology are consistent globally. There is not a European physics or an African physics or an Indian physics. There is only physics.

But the same is not true of religion. The claims of the world's religions about the nature of ultimate reality vary greatly. On at least an initial, superficial understanding, all their views cannot be true. Some must be mistaken. Is not the disagreement among them a clue that they might all be mistaken? That religiosity itself is an error?

The question also arises internally to various religious traditions whenever they encounter the religious other. Are many religions true or is mine the only true one? Does not the claim of there being one, uniquely true religion undermine harmony amongst the religious communities? But at the same time, if I believe my religion is true, does that not commit me to the view that the others, at least to the degree that they disagree with mine, are false? What about salvation? Christianity, for example, says that God loves all people. But if one needs to be Christian to be saved, then are not most people damned for all eternity? What does this then say about God's love, or God's omnipotence, if there is no way God can save people if they don't accept the Christian message?

**Feminism:** As a variety of postmodern thought, feminism has raised questions that challenge the

philosophy of religion at a fundamental level. Is the notion of truth with which philosophers of religion have traditionally worked embedded in an inescapably patriarchal and chauvinistic way of viewing the world, which devalues what have often been characterized as more feminine modes of perception, such as intuition? Is the idea of male rationality elevated at the expense of its feminine counterpart? Is the dominant Western image of God as male inherently oppressive?

### **Towards a Vedantic Philosophy of Religion**

For a Hindu reader, it must already be apparent from reading this essay that the structure of the Western philosophy of religion—the questions it approaches, the way it phrases and understands these questions, and the assumptions that it makes—have all been shaped by the Western historical context from which this discipline has emerged. When a Western philosopher of religion speaks of 'God', for example, even if she is only speaking of God in the abstract, and not of any particular traditional understanding of God, it is apparent that Christian assumptions underlie the entire discussion. This is true even if the aim of the philosopher is to disprove God's existence. In the West, 'God', even for an atheist, is the God of Christianity, or more minimally, the personal deity of the three Abrahamic traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (though Islam is ill-understood in the West).

The conflict between religion and science, for example, is clearly not a conflict between all religions and science, but between a particular type of supernaturalist theism predominant in the West and science. If, in a given tradition—such as Hinduism—God is conceived of very differently, then the conflicts between religion and science as they occur in the West may conceivably not exist for that tradition. Or a different set of conflicts will arise. God, in Hinduism, did not create the universe at some particular point in time. Creation, rather, is an ongoing activity, with no beginning and no end. Even the classical Aristotelian cos-

mological argument—which is foundational to a great deal of Western philosophy of religion and on which philosophers in training cut their teeth—includes a claim that would be contested by many Indic traditions: the claim that an infinite regression of causes is not acceptable. If some version of the cosmological argument is to apply to Hinduism, then the primacy of God as the first cause would have to be a logical rather than a temporal primacy; for in terms of time, there has always been some universe or other (though there are numerous cosmic cycles or *kalpas*). Hinduism also has no trouble with the idea of evolution, or an earth that is billions of years old, all issues which are still quite contentious in at least some Christian circles in the West.

So what would the philosophy of religion look like if it were undertaken from a Vedantic perspective? What if philosophy returned home, so to speak, to India?

**Process Philosophy:** A very exciting possible answer to this is provided by a movement among some Western philosophers, based in the thought of Alfred North Whitehead, known as process philosophy, or process metaphysics.

Process metaphysics is Whitehead's attempt to return to the original Greek (and I would add, by implication, Indic) ideal of philosophy: to explain everything, 'to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted' (3). Whitehead's aim is a holistic vision of reality that incorporates the insights of religion, philosophy, and science—that updates the philosophy of Plato, so to speak, allowing for the intervening centuries of accumulated scientific and religious knowledge. Though Whitehead was not strongly versed in Hindu traditions, he did have a good grasp of Buddhism. As he says of his system, it 'seems to approximate more to some strains of Indian, or Chinese, thought, than to western Asiatic, or European, thought' (7).

Indeed, more than any other traditional Indic system, process metaphysics comes the closest, in

my judgment, to the Vishishtadvaita Vedanta of Ramanuja, though it has a number of close affinities with Buddhism as well—particularly Yogachara thought. Among modern Indic thinkers, his system is closest to that of Sri Aurobindo, seeking as it does to integrate, in a dynamic, evolutionary framework, the seemingly opposed notions of spirit and matter.

Process thought, with its affinities to Vedanta, gives a number of clues as to how a Vedantic philosophy of religion might look, and how it might begin to address various issues facing contemporary philosophers of religion in the West. Regarding epistemological questions, for example, process thought, like Vedanta, does not confine 'experience' as most Western philosophers do, to sensory experience, favouring a more holistic approach. On the basis of this expanded conception of experience, such process thinkers as David Ray Griffin have argued for a re-evaluation of paranormal phenomena, including past-life memory, which are held to be delusory by thinkers wedded to a purely sensory-based epistemology.<sup>2</sup>

The relation between religious tradition and reason, raised by Aquinas and raised again by post-modern philosophers of religion, is also raised in classical Vedanta. Indeed, Shankara addresses this issue in a manner evocative of Aquinas: that reason (*anumāna*) and revelation (*sabda*) must ultimately be in harmony. Contemporary Vedanta, however, as expressed by Swami Vivekananda, is in harmony with modern thought's emphasis on the primacy of direct experience, reconciling tradition and reason by asserting that Shruti, or sacred scripture, is itself the record of the experiences of the sages through whom it was revealed, rather than being a unique, one-time-only supernatural revelation (as has been traditionally claimed by Christians about the Bible). This also fits in with process thought's self-location in the modern paradigm, where the ultimate authority is reason reflecting on experience, and the notion of experience is sufficiently expansive to include yogic experience.

Process thought also seeks to reconcile the dif-

ferences between Western religion and science with a radically reconceived understanding of God as organically related to the universe rather than wholly other and transcendent. This, again, reflects a Vedantic understanding as well, such as when Swami Vivekananda refers to God as 'the soul of our souls', or when Ramanuja conceives of the universe as the body of God, and God as the soul of the universe—an image which Griffin has also used to explain process thought.

In terms of religious diversity, Vedanta—particularly modern Vedanta—is famously characterized by the teaching that all paths lead to God-realization, that no single religion can claim to exhaust the infinite truth. Process thinkers, too—including myself—have addressed the issue of religious diversity by developing a pluralistic paradigm with striking affinities to Vedanta.<sup>3</sup>

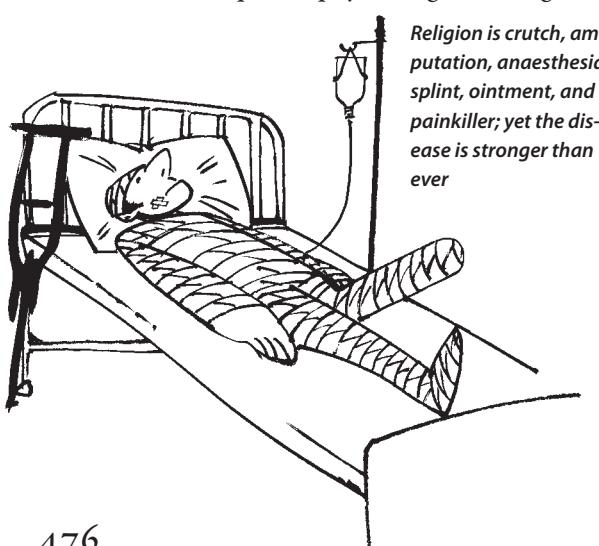
Finally, with regard to the feminist critique of patriarchal rationality, the view of experience held by both Vedanta and process thought is sufficiently expansive to incorporate such traditionally 'feminine' modes of knowledge as feeling and intuition. Indeed, this more holistic, feminist understanding of experience is central to Vedanta as a spiritual path. If our knowledge is limited to what the senses reveal and what reason can determine on their basis, then sadhana becomes incomprehensible, and one ends up at the very impasse that seems to characterize the Western philosophy of religion during every

phase of its history: blind faith and blind reason at loggerheads with one another as irreconcilable alternatives.

### **Returning Home**

When one 'brings home' the philosophy of religion, so to speak, to its Indic origins, the outline of a holistic system begins to emerge that can address many of the issues with which Western philosophers have long struggled. This is not to say that Western thought does not also have valuable lessons for practitioners of Vedanta as well. In the course of its long pilgrimage from India to the West and back again it has examined questions and issues in ways that are sometimes similar to and sometimes strikingly different from the ways these same questions and issues have been raised in Indic thought. If, as I have suggested, the answers to many issues facing contemporary philosophers of religion may be found by adopting a process or Vedantic approach, it is equally true that raising these issues may draw the attention of Indian thinkers to resources in their own traditions that were heretofore dormant. Both parties to the conversation can then find their positions enriched by the encounter with the other.

In the global era in which we now live, in which the distinctions between East and West are increasingly breaking down, and both Indians and Westerners are increasingly influenced by one another's traditions of thought, the ideal might be, as Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda have both suggested, an integration of both traditions, so they may render the greatest benefit to all: not an Eastern or a Western, but a *human* tradition.



PB

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## **Ethics: Some Contemporary Views**

**Dr M Sivaramkrishna**

**E**PICTETUS, who though born a slave turned out to be the wisest of counsellors, says: ‘When we name things correctly, we comprehend them correctly, without adding information or judgments that aren’t there. ... Do not risk being beguiled by appearances and constructing theories and interpretations based on distortion through misnaming. Give your assent only to what is actually true.’<sup>1</sup> This is an idea which none could possibly find difficult to accept, but implementing which poses innumerable and seemingly insurmountable problems. This is specially the case with ethics.

### **Ethics and Dharma**

What does ‘ethics’ mean? When we name something as ‘ethical’, are we sure we are not using the term merely as a synonym for morality or values? If we are to keep this distinction, we have to be very strict with our frames of reference. Is this possible? Rather, is it desirable to be burdened with strait-jacketed, rigid frames?

As Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it while discussing moral disagreement, ‘Knowing what the word means doesn’t tell you much about what it applies to; like ‘notions of right and wrong’.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, we do not know what the word actually meant in the original, unless we get into etymology. Thomas Kadankavil

notes: ‘The Greek root *ethos* and Latin root *mos*, which originally meant dwelling or stall, refer to the security and stability provided by customs and traditions of our society.’ While this appears straightforward, the Hindu equivalent of this term could raise some questions: ‘The Hindu term for morality and ethics is *dharma*. It comes from the root “dhr” which also means hold together. Thus the function of dharma is to hold human society together for its stability and secure growth. Right conduct is essential if human society is to survive.’<sup>3</sup>

Etymology is fine, but ethical behaviour—which includes both ethical awareness and ethical action—may not always be in accordance with or conform to etymological nuances. Before going into deeper issues, let me cite an instance. The crucial term in George M Williams’s recent essay on Swami Vivekananda is *dharma*: ‘The Dharmic Journey of Swami Vivekananda: From the Apostle of Hindu Universalism to Hinduism as the Religion Eternal.’<sup>4</sup> ‘Dharmic journey’ is itself a novel and somewhat puzzling theme. Williams explains: ‘The young Hindu monk, Vivekananda, could find his way to centre stage on the strength of his visions: Hinduism had to be represented from the ideal plane of universal religion.’ And, ‘The first among the spiritual children of the Dakshineswar priest of Kali, Shri Ramakrishna, [he] could weave together Hinduism, Vedanta and the Religion Eternal, the *Sanatana Dharma*, in a message not always understood by his hearers’ (370).

Is *ethics* in Greek comparable with *dharma* in Sanskrit? Or do they form a contrastive pair? What do *dhārmic journey* and *sanātana dharma* connote? The word ‘eternal’ is also ambivalent. For instance, the two categories *śruti* and *smṛti* are probably correctives that hold universals in check. Swami Ran-



ganathananda's fine idiom is worth remembering in this context: *eternal* values for a *changing* society. If social dynamics are in flux, there can only be a deferral of a permanent notion of the eternal. Moreover, the Kantian notion of the categorical imperative as the *sine qua non* of ethics hardly applies, it seems to me, to the multiple fluid contexts that dharma encompasses. To freeze it into an imperative is to get caught in binaries.

But, to extend the point and find its further significance one can cite two more contexts: one from the Bhagavadgita, and the other from a mantra on Sri Ramakrishna composed by Swami Vivekananda. The Gita's celebrated idiom is: 'Yadā yadā hi dharmasya ...; whenever there is a decline of dharma and a rise of *adharma*, do I, [the Lord], manifest myself.' This passage does not say Sanatana Dharma or Hindu dharma, it simply speaks of dharma.<sup>5</sup> Could it be that this statement is not necessarily about a religious or theological context but about the ethical world and the universal awareness of it? It may or may not be so. But since the statement is located within the Hindu frame of reference, one is tempted to link it to the etymological or semantic associations inhering therein.

In his *pranāma mantra* on Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda describes Ramakrishna as not merely establishing dharma, but as the embodiment of all dharma. *Sarva-dharma-svarūpa* is normally translated as 'the embodiment or essence of various/all faiths'. Perfectly tenable. But can we extend the connotation to mean the ineradicable, inalienable natural principles of ethics and religion on the one side and the secular domains of the social and natural sciences on the other?

### **The Good and the Pleasant**

At this stage it is important that we take note of what Amartya Sen has to say in his interesting study on ethics and economics: '[A] surprising feature is the contrast between the self-consciously "non-ethical" character of modern economics and the historical evolution of modern economics largely as an offshoot of ethics. Not only was the so-called

"father of modern economics", Adam Smith, a Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow (admittedly, a rather pragmatic town), but the subject of economics was for a long time seen as something like a branch of ethics. The fact that economics used to be taught at Cambridge until fairly recently simply as a part of "the Moral Science Tripos" is no more than an instance of the traditional diagnosis of the nature of economics.' This, of course, was contested by, among others, Lionel Robbins, who declared, "It does not seem logically possible to associate the two studies (economics and ethics) in any form but mere juxtaposition."<sup>6</sup>

A very significant development that led to disastrous consequences. Put simply, value got identified with price and user became the compulsive consumer. A glossy magazine like *Exotica* costs a hundred rupees, while the Gita or the Bible can be had for as little as ten. Yet there is the persistent presence of religious and ethical themes even in glossy magazines. This is surely one of the most interesting of phenomena. For instance, *Exotica* itself contains a very fascinating essay on the parables of Sri Ramakrishna. Written by Rinki Ghosh, it is called 'The Prophet's Parables'. Dilip Banerjee's photos of the Dakshineswar Kali Temple and related areas are simply superb. And, as if to assert that everything has its own place in Mother's creation, opposite the photo of the Kali temple appears an ad for the popular scotch whiskey *Chivas Regal*!<sup>7</sup>

One can argue that this is a strange pastiche, a juxtaposition that is in bad taste. But, a deeper insight into this ethical dilemma is provided by the Great Master's constant mention of *kamini-kanchan* (woman and gold) as Mahamaya's snares which few can escape. In fact, magazines like *Exotica* that regularly incorporate articles like the one cited above, expose us to the challenge of ethical choices. You enjoy every bit, but enjoyment could very well go with the *awareness* that enjoyment without limiting checks and balances is itself the inevitable source of sorrow. All that is desired may not be desirable. Yet, one need not split *śreyas* (the good) from *preyas* (the pleasant) or *nibśreyasa*

(beatitude) from *abhyudaya* (worldly advancement). The *electable* has to be balanced with the *delectable*.

Even Derrida's critique of Marxism recognizes the persistence of religious residues. In a recent incisive study, Nissim Mannathukaren cites a passage from Derrida: 'One cannot ... dispense with the vast question of religion and the religious ... The religious question should not be regarded as clear or settled today. One should not act as if one knew what the "religious" or the "quasi-religious" was—above all, if one wants to be a Marxist, or calls oneself that.' Derrida also observes that 'it is difficult to expunge every trace of the moral or of "religion", or at any event, every "act of faith" from a revolutionary injunction.'<sup>8</sup>

In discussing ethical issues, therefore, one needs to consider not just moral sanctions or legal mandates, but the natural spiritual bases. Otherwise, one can justify any act as ethical by torturing the axioms of, for instance, the *dharma śāstras* or tracts on ethics, modern or postmodern. It is not just philosophers but specialists in various fields who are coming together for workshops on ethics. The papers of one such workshop held in Geneva in 2005 have been put together in a volume called *Thinking Ethics*. The areas covered include 'ethics and consciousness', 'ethics and knowledge', 'ethics and performance', 'ethics and disobedience', and 'ethics in real time'. In her essay on 'ethics and consciousness', Christine Wicker quotes Dr Christoph Stueckelberger, Director of the Institute for Theology and Ethics, Berne, to the effect that 'if we try to put religion aside it will come in the back door'. Wicker forecasts: 'Respect for religious diversity and engagement with people of various faiths will be an essential ethic of the future.'

### **Our Rights and Our Good**

In his short but fascinatingly smart *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, Simon Blackburn says that 'arguing about ethics is arguing about the place of the end of the rainbow: something which is one thing from one point of view, and another from another'.<sup>10</sup>

**Virtue and Vice:** That again which is virtue may, according to time and place, be sin. Appropriation (of what belongs to others), untruth, and injury and killing, may, under special circumstances, become virtue.

Acts that are (apparently evil), when undertaken for considerations connected with the gods, the scriptures, life itself, and the means by which life is sustained, produce consequences that are good.

—Mahabharata, 'Shanti Parva', 37.11, 14.

Blackburn points out that though we have become aware of and 'sensitive to the physical environment ... perhaps fewer of us are sensitive to what we might call the moral or ethical environment'. And this environment 'is the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live'. He adds that 'an *ethical* climate is a different thing from a *moralistic* one. Indeed, one of the marks of an ethical climate *may be* hostility to moralizing, which is somehow out of place or bad form.' Moreover, 'one peculiarity of our present climate is that we care much more about our rights than about our "good"' (3–4). Surprisingly, though Blackburn cites the Upanishads, he lumps them together with Confucius and Plato, whose 'concern was with the state of the soul' (4). In fact, he may have overlooked the fact that the Upanishads do draw a distinction between what is good and what is desired.

In an extremely interesting book on 'Philosophy and the Meaning of Life', Julian Baggini (founder editor of *The Philosopher's Magazine*) says: 'We are in danger of expecting almost as a matter of right those things in life which no one can take for granted. It sounds old-fashioned, and perhaps it is, but we have forgotten how to be thankful for what we've got and instead only know to be resentful about what we haven't. Our desire for happiness is like a craving that we think can be satisfied by feeding more. Yet it is the craving that is the problem'.<sup>11</sup>

Baggini lists seven threats to ethics: The death of God, relativism, egoism, evolutionary theory, determinism and futility, unreasonable demands, and false consciousness. All these determine our

attitude to birth, death, desire and the meaning of life, pleasure, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, freedom from the bad, and rights and natural rights. ‘Being good and living well’ is the general assumption behind ethics.

### **Applied Ethics**

But how do we do it? By allowing science to undermine the bases of religion and, consciously or unconsciously, rupturing the normative behaviour that it lays down? Fortunately, not all scientists accept the dogmatic unilateral supremacy accorded to reason, with demonstrable data constituting the only acceptable proofs. For instance, even the apparently bizarre metaphor of the world as a theatre (or *lilā*, to use the Hindu term) is seen by Bernard Baars as explaining not just the conscious functions of the brain, for more interestingly, sitting behind the scenes ‘are the director and the playwright and so on who are shaping the contents of consciousness’. And the contents of consciousness obviously include ethical choices.<sup>12</sup>

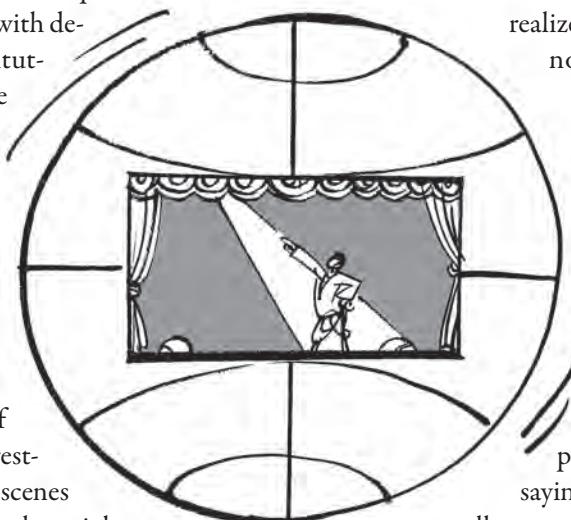
What is actually at stake is not ethics per se, but the structures of values that constitute applied ethics (ethical notions as guides to practical living). And in this debate meta-ethics—speculations about what ethics is all about—is of but limited use. Indeed, as Appiah discerningly points out: ‘Scientific stories are not the only words we live by. ... One thing that is right in the Positivist picture is this: the methods of the natural sciences have not led to the kind of progress in our understanding of values that they have led to in our grasp of facts. So we may be able to learn about values from societies where science is less deeply implanted than in ours; if scientific methods have not advanced our understanding

of values, its superiority offers no reason to suppose that our understanding of values is superior.’<sup>13</sup>

So, there is a residue of significance in the values which formed the bases of traditional religious/spiritual patterns. It is interesting that Appiah’s critique of facts and values is exactly what Professor Hiriyantha had suggested several decades earlier: ‘The meaning of value can be best indicated by contrasting it with that of another, viz. fact.’ Fact ‘has reality only in its fulfilment, and needs therefore to be actualised before it can become truly a value.

... If facts are apprehended, values are realized.’ But facts themselves are not enough. There should be a combination of ‘cognition, feeling and will’.

In short, there is ‘instrumental value’ and ‘intrinsic value.’ Thus, wealth is the former not the latter in most cases. Hiriyantha also suggests that ‘modern pragmatism ... tries to explain facts in terms of value, saying that, when analysed, they all turn out to be values; and pure science does the reverse by virtually eliminating values and retaining only facts.’<sup>14</sup>



*World as Theatre*

### **Ethics and Morals: Dharma and Nīti**

The crux is: do definitions help? For instance, we have the *puruṣārthas*: dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. Several aspects of the bewilderingly diverse range of ethics are crystallized in and through these concepts. Artha and kama can roughly be equated with money and matrimony, and the absence or presence of harmonious attitudes towards them. What about dharma and moksha?

There are any number of interpretations for these terms. Indeed, as Anthony Weston has rightly noted: ‘Our most immediate association with the word “moral” seems to be the word “dilemma”. Moral dilemmas.’ Keeping this in view, he offers a

guarded definition of ethics, values, and moral values. To the question what is ethics, 'philosophers and dictionaries often say something like this: *ethics is the study of moral values; it considers how best to think about moral values and how best to clarify, prioritize and integrate them.*'<sup>15</sup>

What then are values? 'By values I will mean those things that we care about, those things that matter to us, those goals or ideals we aspire to and measure ourselves or others or our society by. Moral values are a special kind of values: those values that give voice to the needs and legitimate expectations of others as well as ourselves. Legitimate expectations may be of many sorts: we rightly expect to be treated with respect, for instance, and with honesty and care.' Finally, moral values are values 'we hold' while ethics has 'a more critical, self-conscious edge. Here we try to go beyond living out our values to thinking them through' (5).

Perhaps, the distinction that Weston draws between ethics and morals is implicit in the two Indic concepts *dharma* and *nīti*. We have *dharma sāstras* and we have the *Niti Shatka* of Bhartrihari and the *Chanakya Niti*. *Dharma* subsumes *nīti*, but *nīti* is not exactly *dharma*. We have also the word *nyāya*, justice. As Bimal Krishna Matilal has shown in his discussion of ethics, succeeding in a dharmic struggle may not always be 'measured in terms of happiness or even well-being. ... The conclusion of the [Kurukshetra] war contributed to nobody's happiness in particular. It did not contribute even to the well-being of the Pandavas.'<sup>16</sup> Obviously, the consequential theory of right action may not appear correct if well-being is taken as the end point. The war in Iraq is a case in point. In short, *dharma* has 'an ever-elusive nature' (*ibid.*).

### **Global Ethics**

All these point to the fact that religion plays a vital role in determining ethical decisions. Yet we have, by and large, not been able to come to terms with the dominant trend towards ethical relativ-

### **Ethical problems? Think this way:**

- E** Examine and explore thoroughly the ticklish issue
- T** Think carefully about the purity of ends and means
- H** Highlight the positive and negative consequences
- I** Implement with integrity
- C** Choose the least harmful and the maximally fruitful solution
- S** Shelve anxiety about the result

ism. This has led to desacralization of the lives of even such leaders as Mahatma Gandhi, who are subjected to all sorts of frames of study, not excluding allegedly erotic liaisons.<sup>17</sup> Many philosophers either plainly or obliquely concede the risks of endless relativism but are reluctant to take a stand, afraid that they may be regarded as guilty of absolutism. We cannot go back, but as Appiah suggests, cosmopolitanism in its original meaning of 'citizen of the cosmos' may be actively propagated in a 'rational way', rid of theological glosses (*vasudhaiva kutumbakam* is perhaps a near approximation of this concept).

We can now sum up these random reflections on ethics by looking at bioethics, currently the most controversial discipline in the domain of ethics. In the important volume *Handbook of Bioethics and Religion* (New York: Oxford, 2006), many perspectives have been highlighted. These include such issues as stem cell research, cloning, euthanasia, reproductive health, alternative medicine, and the ethics of medical practice, including such questions as how far practitioners are ethically empowered to diagnose and reveal the truth to patients and what response patients are likely to have to terminal problems. One essay discusses the Buddhist perspective on the Japanese organ transplant law. The editor, David E. Guinn, in his introduction to the fifth section titled 'Religion and Ethical Praxis', notes the interesting fact that 'more than 90 per cent of the members of the Congress said that they consulted their religious beliefs for voting on important matters and 80 per cent of all Americans said they take guidance in living their lives from the Bible. If this is so, it is

likely that religious perspectives have already been incorporated into public policies' (249). But the opinions of 'traditional secularists' should also be considered, concedes Guinn. Indeed, 'It [the government policy] should justify its action based upon norms found common among all world views' (11).

This, I think, is happening. There is a full-length study entitled *Hindu Bioethics for the Twenty-first Century* authored by S Cromwell Crawford (Albany: State University of New York, 2003). These were lectures originally delivered in Indian universities under the auspices of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, Delhi. This is an incisive, well-documented study of the subject based on clear recognition of the unique relevance of Hindu bioethics. 'We propose to demonstrate,' Crawford says, 'that in this difficult venture, the Hindu tradition can prove a valuable ally.' He further explains: '*In philosophical terms*, its diverse schools of thought, such as Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisesika and Vedanta, are admirably suited to the demands of our pluralistic age. *In ethical terms*, the contextual structure of the Hindu approach, its flexibility and adaptability, invests it with the type of dilemmatic thinking that is required by contemporary bioethics in a world of rapid change. *In medical terms*, while Hinduism shares with all other faith traditions positive attitudes towards medicine and healing arts, Hinduism is distinctive because it has evolved its own indigenous system of medicine that is based on medical manuals that comment directly on health issues' (6). Such an open-ended and pluralistic approach to ethical issues based on existent ground realities is the need of our times.



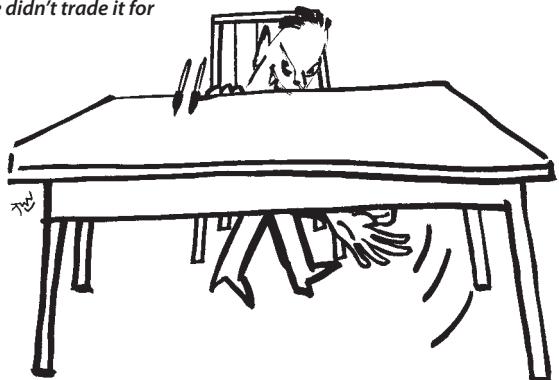
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*The soul is not free;  
it costs whatever  
we didn't trade it for*



GOPA & HIRANYAGARBHA

# The Cosmos in Western and Indian Thought

Swami Durgananda

HUMAN beings have always marvelled at the world. From their struggle to make sense of it have been born various philosophies and ways of understanding it. In this article we consider two such approaches, the European and the Indian, which exemplify the dichotomy of East and West.

The Western thinker was predominantly preoccupied with the external world, with finding the physical laws that govern it. The Indian thinker, in addition to investigating the external world—that which appears even to animals—investigated the subject *to whom* that world appears, and discovered the glorious Atman, luminous, omniscient, blissful; and Brahman as the Ultimate Reality. This turning inwards marks an additional step in evolution: when the living being becomes *self-aware*. Western thought has not apprehended levels subtler than the mind. The discovery of Brahman, the uncaused cause, is probably the most precious gift of India to the world.

The Vedic rishis made another important discovery regarding the mystery of the universe that we see outside us. They saw it as a ‘self-sustaining, self-regulating’ universal harmony.<sup>1</sup> One may call it Prakriti, Universal Flux, or Cosmic Yajna.<sup>2</sup> They saw that this yajna included everything: the energy of the sun, vegetation, ingesting food, digestion, thinking, joy, sorrow—in short, all that is—and saw a single life-force flowing throughout creation. Imperfection, such as disease, evil, and sorrow, is a part of this mysterious and ‘secret economy’.<sup>3</sup> To transcend imperfection—the adventitious, something that is unrelated to the essential self in us—they prescribed an attitudinal change towards acceptance of all that is outside our control, a wilful participation in the cosmic play without withhold-

ing oneself (self-less-ness). Yajna thus is a paradigm shift from instinctive self-defence that desperately protects a separate individuality to conscious integration with the universe, from raising barriers around one’s self to seamless mergence with the without, from egoistic to altruistic behaviour, from aggrandizing to giving, and so forth. Yajna entails ‘give and take between the living creature and its environment’ (22), and automatically opens channels for a free *inflow* from the infinite reservoir that is outside us.<sup>4</sup>

This give-and-take prescribed by the rishis did not preclude ‘generation of wealth’. This is probably the reason why we come across passages in the scriptures such as these: *anena prasavisyadhvameśa voṣṭviṣṭakāmadhuk*, by this shall ye multiply, this shall be the milch cow of your desires; *tvāṁ bahulośi prajayā ca dhanena ca*, your offspring and wealth are vast; *trpyati prajayā paśubhirannādyena tejasā brahmavarcasena*, he is satisfied also with offspring, animals (cattle), physical lustre, and holy effulgence; *mahānbhavati prajayā paśubhirbrahmavarcasena*, he becomes great in progeny, wealth (literally, cattle), and holy effulgence.<sup>5</sup>

Material prosperity has always been a precondition for human progress. We may look at, for example, the Greek and the Roman empires, ancient Egypt, ancient India, and now, the West. The ‘Surplus in Man’, as Rabindranath Tagore puts it in *The Religion of Man*, will not be released until the basic needs of living are fulfilled. Creativity flowers after fulfilment, and expressing one’s creative urge, again, enhances fulfilment.

It must be mentioned that in writings in non-Indian cultures, too, we find terms that refer to what Indian Philosophy calls Brahman (pure consciousness) and Shakti (its power to create). *Tao*, the ‘eter-

nally existent, immanent as well as transcendent ... ‘inexpressible’, the source of all things along with its power *Te* (yet inseparable from it) is praised in the Chinese scripture *Tao-te Ching* (c. 600 BCE).<sup>6</sup> Logos, the underlying ordering principle of the universe, is described in Greek writings (c. 500 BCE). However, despite these discoveries made by visionaries in their respective cultures, neither Western nor Chinese culture, as a whole, has been able to look beyond the realm of mind—to the misfortune of all humanity.

### **Western Philosophy**

In European history, we find two different philosophical approaches to have developed. The first approach is that of the Graeco-Roman philosophers. Theirs is a language of generalization, synthetic and philosophic in nature, speaking of the underlying reality behind everything. At the turn of the fifteenth century, the attention of Western thinkers turned chiefly to particulars, analytical and mathematical in nature, referring to the material. This is the second approach. In both these approaches, pure consciousness is the conspicuous

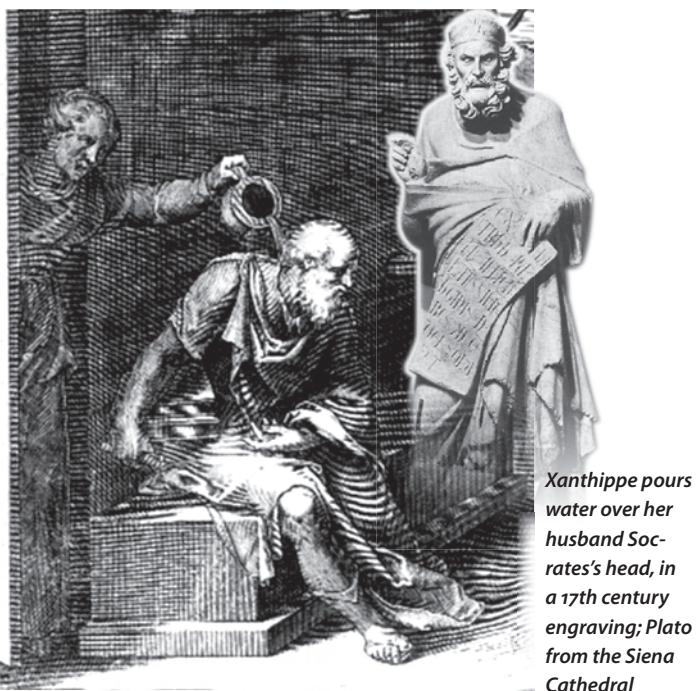
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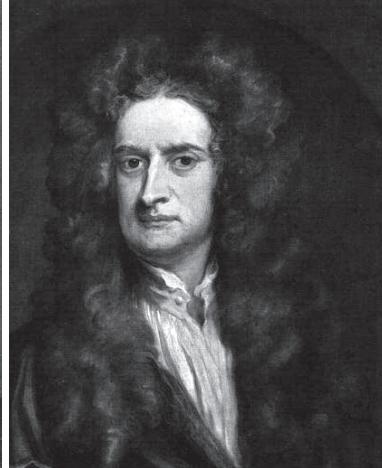
Interestingly, the philosophy of the Graeco-Roman period comes very close to Indian philosophy. The Greek term *Logos*, representing a ‘fire-like divine force’ that produces all that is ‘discernible in the flux of nature’, was perhaps first used by Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE).<sup>7</sup> This *Logos* resembles the divine *yajna* mentioned above. To illustrate that everything in nature was in a state of flux, Heraclitus gave the example of a person not being able to step into the same river twice. He believed that his own thought ‘partook of the divine *Logos*’. He distinguished ‘being’ from ‘becoming’—the latter representing flux, and the former representing the underlying cause. Thus the Greek vanguards had reached the threshold of the beyond. Besides Heraclitus, we must mention at least four others: Socrates, Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus.

Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), who, it is said, understood that he was truly wise because he alone realized his ignorance, applied reason and philosophy to morality and human conduct, saving it from superstition. ‘Full knowledge of ultimate truth,’ Socrates believed, ‘was contained within the soul’ and one needed ‘only to be spurred to conscious reflection in order to become aware of it.’

Pythagoras (582–500 BCE), well known for his contributions to geometry, was primarily a philosopher engaged with religious and philosophical matters. He taught that the ‘soul is a prisoner of the body, is released from the body at death, and is reincarnated’. Pythagoras was also instructed in the Ionian school of Greek philosophy. This school, which developed in Ionia, on the western Anatolian coast, in the sixth century BCE, maintained that the ‘first principle from which all things evolve is an intangible, invisible, infinite substance that was called “the boundless”’. This substance, they believed, is ‘eternal and indestructible’.

Plato (428–347 BCE) described humanity as ‘imprisoned in a cave’ with backs turned against the fire, ‘mistaking shadows on the wall for reality’—because when people moved themselves, the shadows moved too; and they thought that they





From left: Heraclitus and Democritus, from paintings by Hendrik ter Brugghen; Descartes, by Frans Hals; and Newton, by Godfrey Kneller

were the shadows. The fire represents the Absolute, which is luminous, and the shadows, the apparent world. However, Plato regarded the philosopher, not the seer, as the person who penetrates through ignorance.

Plotinus (205–270 CE), usually regarded as the founder of Neoplatonism, put forward a doctrine of ‘constant transmission of powers from the Absolute Being, or the One, to the creation through several agencies, the first of which is nous, or pure intelligence, from which flows the soul of the world; from this, in turn, flow the souls of humans and animals, and finally matter.’ He said, ‘By purification people can gradually lift themselves to an intuition of the nous, and ultimately to a complete and ecstatic union with the One—that is, God.’ Plotinus claimed to have ‘experienced this divine ecstasy on several occasions’ during his life.

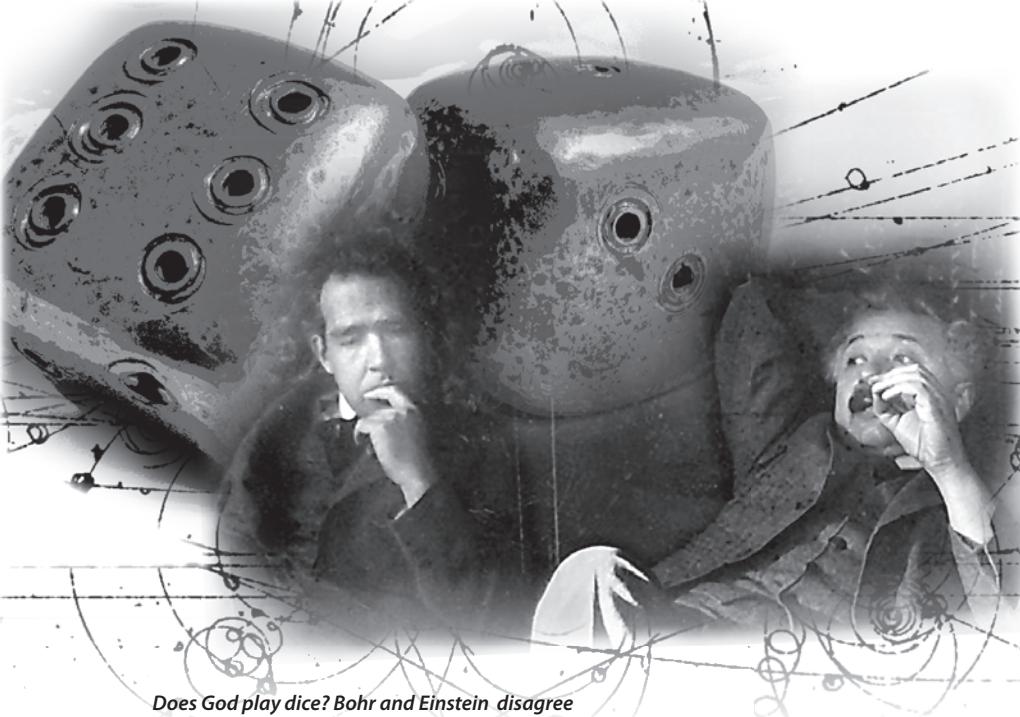
Two theories have been developed in the West regarding the creation of the universe. (i) The theory of emanation: it declares God’s utter transcendence, unreachability, and unknowability. It was developed by thinkers like Dionysius and Dante, and held up by saints such as Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross. (ii) The theory of immanence: it posits Reality as something implicit in the self and in the universe; and everything is bathed in Reality. It was advocated by Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, St Teresa, and Jakob Boehme among others.<sup>8</sup> These two theories are at opposite poles, and the West, rooted in its Greek heritage of reason and insisting doggedly on ‘resolving’ contradictions, is perpetually stuck with this paradox, unable to go beyond

these dual descriptions of the indescribable. Nor has the West continued the search for ultimate realities that characterized Graeco-Roman thought; it has remained satisfied with intellectually analysing the world as it appears to the senses.

### Western Science

Descartes, Newton, and Laplace were among the pioneers of modern science. The French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) famously said, ‘*Cogito, ergo sum*; I think, therefore I am.’ Although this statement is a pointer to the true subject, the Atman, yet, Descartes argued that the essential characteristic of the subject was thinking—which in fact is merely an activity of the brain.

The English mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton (1643–1727) discovered the laws of motion. One could determine, with the help of these laws, the position and the speed of any moving body. The French astronomer and mathematician Pierre Simon Laplace (1749–1827) applied them to the solar system with great success. The West was feverish with hope: one could determine everything! The British theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking (b. 1942), probably the most famous living scientist today, has made a very interesting statement in his book *A Brief History of Time*. After describing the big bang, he suggests that there is nothing for God to do except set up an initial condition: ‘If the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a crea-



*Does God play dice? Bohr and Einstein disagree*

tor?<sup>9</sup> Ukrainian-born physicist George Gamow (1904–1968), building on the work of others, developed the theory of expansion of the universe from a single point, technically called a singularity, to which he gave the name ‘big bang’. It must be noted here that the expanding universe should not be thought of as matter flying apart in static space; it is rather the expansion of space itself. Similarly, the big bang should not be thought as an ‘explosion of a lump of matter sitting in empty space’; it is rather an expansion of time and space itself with mass in it.

The German-born American physicist Albert Einstein (1879–1955) proved that space, time, and mass are interdependent. To put it simply, the ‘flow’ of time and the ‘geometry’ of space themselves change according to the mass contained in them. With his theory of relativity, Einstein solved much of the mystery of the observed universe. It is commonly understood that Einstein said that everything is relative. This is not true. Einstein himself said that the word ‘relativity’ is a misnomer, and he preferred to call it the opposite: the ‘invariance theory’. His theory refers to the unchanging behind the apparent change.<sup>10</sup> Yet, this ‘unchanging’ remained an object. It is believed that Einstein integrated the observer with the observed universe in his calculations.<sup>11</sup> This is not true. For, although Einstein

integrated time, space, and the observing *apparatus* with the observed universe, he would not proceed as far as integrating the perceiving *consciousness*, much less call it fundamental. For example, when Einstein says ‘blue light will appear red to the observer moving at such and such velocity’, by ‘observer’ he means either the eye or a scientific instrument.

This is apparent from his dialogue with his coeval Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. ‘The world is ... a relative world,’ said Tagore, ‘depending for its reality upon our consciousness’; but, ‘Truth is independent of human beings’, maintained Einstein.<sup>12</sup>

The first crack in Western confidence came with the discovery of the uncertainty principle, in 1927, by Danish physicist Niels Bohr and German physicists Max Planck and Werner Heisenberg. According to the uncertainty principle, it is impossible to ascertain *both* the position and the velocity of a body simultaneously. One can predict these only as statistical probabilities.<sup>13</sup> The discovery of the uncertainty principle had far-reaching repercussions. It offended the ordinary sense of causation and determinacy. Einstein himself believed in determinacy and died perturbed by the uncertainty business. He believed that there was a ‘hidden variable’ somewhere that would explain away the ‘uncertainty’; however, he was never able to find it. Bohr and Einstein would debate long hours. It was during one such sitting that the classic dialogue ensued: ‘God does not play dice’, said Einstein; ‘Stop telling God what to do!’ retorted Bohr.<sup>14</sup> Apparently, Bohr emerged the victor.

In addition to the above mentioned macrocosmic approach, science has been trying to find the

ultimate building block of the universe through a microcosmic approach called particle physics. This branch of physics has discovered, in unsatisfying succession, the molecule, atom, proton, electron, baryon, meson, lepton, hadron, quark, and numerous other sub-atomic particles, some of which live on a time scale of  $10^{-21}$  seconds (and which, in the final analysis, turn out to be not exactly particles but events in the sub-atomic world) and, in the process, earned for itself a rather derogatory name from Kenneth Ford: 'The Particle Zoo'.<sup>15</sup>

The British philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) attempted to formulate a general system of logic free from abstract philosophical notions, hoping to establish logic as an unassailable—complete and consistent—system of assessing knowledge. However, after decades of effort with his co-worker, British mathematician and metaphysician Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), he came to a frustrating paradox, now famous by the name 'Russell's paradox', which may be stated as a story: There is a kingdom, at the entrance to which guards ask all would-be entrants questions relating to their entry. If the entrant is found to tell a lie, they must kill him immediately; if he speaks the truth, they allow him to enter. One day, the guards ask a certain entrant, 'Why have you come?' The entrant answers, 'To die at your hands.' Now, should the guards kill him or permit him to enter? If they permit him to enter, his statement becomes untrue, for which they must kill him; if they kill him, his statement will prove to be true, for which they must let him enter. This paradox highlights an inherent loophole in our system of logic. Later on, the Austrian-born logician Kurt Gödel (1906–1978) formally proved that in any formal symbolic system, one can construct a proposition that is neither provable nor disprovable within the same system; alternately, in a complete system, one can construct an inconsistency, while a consistent system is necessarily incomplete.<sup>16</sup> This has admittedly shattered the Western dream of determinacy. It is now clear that there is a distinction between truth and provability.

(To be concluded)

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2. *Bhagavadgita*, 3.4–30.
3. Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (Boston: One-world, 2000), 26, 85.
4. *Nimittamaprayojakāṁ prakṛtināṁ varanābhedastu tataḥ kṣetrikavat*; good and bad deeds are not the direct causes in the transformations of nature, but they act as breakers of obstacles to the evolution of nature: as a farmer breaks the obstacles to the course of water, which then runs down by its own nature (*Yoga Sutra*, 4.3).
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10. Nigel Calder, *Einstein's Universe* (New York: Random House, 1982), 2; and Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), 120.
11. See, for example, *Einstein's Universe*, 2.
12. Avijit Roy, 'Rabindranath Tagore: In Conversation with Albert Einstein' <[http://www.mukto-mona.com/Articles/einstein\\_tagore.htm](http://www.mukto-mona.com/Articles/einstein_tagore.htm)> (accessed 1 June 2007). On how atomic physics has pulled the 'observer' into the equation, see Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), 152, 332.
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14. *Einstein's Universe*, 141.
15. *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, 'Stable Particle Table', Appendix; see also *The Tao of Physics*, 252, 225; Swami Jitatmananda, 'Quest for the Ultimate Building Block of the Universe', *Prabuddha Bharata*, 88/12 (Dec. 1983), 504.
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# Reminiscences of Sri Ramakrishna

Ramendrasundar Bhattacharya\*

WHEN I was eight years old, I went with my father to visit Rani Rasmani's temple garden in Dakshineswar. As far as I recall, it was a summer morning. Our country home was in Khunberia Village in the district of Medinipur, twenty miles from Kamarpukur, the birthplace of Sri Ramakrishna. My father and the Master were contemporaries. They knew each other since childhood and were friends. My father lived both in the village and in Calcutta. He always visited the Master when he travelled to and from Calcutta. If the Master had any news to send to Kamarpukur, my father would get it before leaving for the village, and then he would bring the news from Kamarpukur to the Master when he returned to Calcutta. One day, before leaving for his village, my father told me: 'Today I shall take you to Dakshineswar. There you will see a famous Kali temple and a living God.'

We first went to the Bhavatarini Kali temple and bowed down to the Divine Mother. Then we went to the Master's room, but he was not there. A

young man told us that he had gone towards the Panchavati. We went there and found him watching the Ganges. A couple of young devotees were with him. The Master was pleased to see my father and enquired about his welfare. I saw my father prostrate fully on the dusty ground and touch the feet of the Master. He took the dust of the Master's feet and put it on his head as well as on mine. He then said to me: 'I told you that I would show you a living God—this is the person. Bow down to him and touch his feet.'

Accordingly, I prostrated myself at the Master's feet. He placed his hand on my head and said, 'My child, get up.' Then he blessed me, saying, 'You will live long and be a pandit.' I was overwhelmed when I bowed down to him and he touched my head. Although I was not in a normal state of consciousness, I heard his blessings distinctly and his words rang in my ears for a while.

On that day my father had a short conversation with the Master, and then we returned to Calcutta. That was my first and last visit to the Master. Although I was then a young boy and this happened so long ago, his form is still vivid in my mind's eye. He was tall and well-shaped, a good-looking man with a face that was bright and joyful. His complexion was not white, but fair. My father told me: 'During his youth the Master's complexion was golden; then when he practised severe austerities, his body became emaciated and the brightness of his complexion diminished to some extent.'

It is due to my good karma and virtue acquired over hundreds of lives that I saw Sri Ramakrishna with my own eyes. I consider myself blessed. Two and a half years after my visit, one night I saw the Master in a dream, looking just as he had when I met him. He said to me: 'My child, are you well?

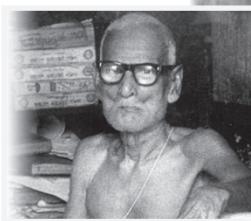
\* Ramendrasundar Bhattacharya (October 1876–14 August 1976), when a young boy, went to Dakshineswar with his father, Jadunath Sarvabhauma, who was a great Sanskrit scholar. There he met Sri Ramakrishna and received his blessing. Ramendra also became a prominent Sanskrit scholar, and established the Hatibagan Chatushpatti (a Sanskrit school) in 1916 in north Calcutta. He taught Indian philosophy and scriptures for sixty years, and wrote *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Bhagavatam*, a Sanskrit life of Sri Ramakrishna consisting of more than 5,000 verses. In 1971 he was honoured by the Government of India as the best teacher of the year. On 12 July 1974 his reminiscences about the Master were recorded at his residence at 56/4 Aravinda Sarani, Calcutta, and subsequently printed in *Udbodhan*, 94/2 (February 1992). This is a translation of the *Udbodhan* article.

I am leaving.' As I heard this, I awoke, startled. Later I learned that the Master had passed away that same night.

I saw Swami Vivekananda a few times after his return from the West. A professor of the Scottish Church College, who was one of Swamiji's teachers, was fond of me. He was a Bengali, but a Christian. He loved Swamiji and had a high opinion of him. But the professor was disappointed when he heard that this talented college student had become a disciple of a brahmin priest and taken monastic vows. One day Swamiji went to see the professor at his home. At that time Swamiji was a sannyasin, but was not yet the world-famous Vivekananda. The professor said to him: 'Well, Naren, what have you done? You have enslaved yourself to a mad priest! I also hear that you consider that priest to be a god and believe that he has come to this world as a saviour. How is it possible that you could believe such an incredible story?'

Swamiji calmly replied: 'Sir, you have heard correctly. I believe that he [Ramakrishna] was God Himself and had taken a human form to save humanity. Previously, I had the same opinion about him as you do, and I told him that many times. He was like a child. He would laugh as he listened to my opinion. He said, "Am I asking you to believe in me?" Sir, at last I was forced to believe who he was. One day he revealed to me that he was God Himself, and that He had appeared in the form of Ramakrishna. He who was Rama and he who was Krishna was manifested in Ramakrishna's body. He showed me separately the form of Rama and the form of Krishna, and then both merged into his own body. Sir, it was not a hallucination; I saw this with my own eyes. Apart from that, I have seen, understood, and realized in many ways that he was God Himself.'

This I heard directly from the professor. He also told me: 'I knew Naren very well. He was not a person to be hoodwinked with any kind of fakery. I understood that day that Naren did not believe Ramakrishna to be God from blind faith. And afterwards, Naren's epic life proved that Ramakrishna



*Presenting the Sri Sri Ramakrishna Bhagavatam to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 16 November 1970; inset, the scholar with his books*

was not an ordinary person.'

Several times the Master came to me in a dream and asked me to write his biography in Sanskrit verse. At first I considered these commands to be mere dreams. However, when I reached 80, the Master again appeared to me in a dream and reminded me to write the story of his life in Sanskrit. When I mentioned my age and broken health, he said: 'Don't worry. You start writing.' Many may not believe my story, but I received the Master's command many times, and at the age of 84 I finished writing his biography. It was with the Master's blessing that I was able to write and publish *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Bhagavatam*. It is the Master's grace that he made me write this book.

I am a poor brahmana, and I gave no thought about the money needed to publish this book. The Government of India provided a grant for its publication. Many distinguished people have appreciated this book, including Suniti Kumar Chatto-padhyay, the national professor of India; Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India; and Swami Vireshwarananda, the president of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. I realized that Ramakrishna was God in human form. By his grace, the dumb become eloquent and the lame scale mountains. His infallible blessing literally came true in my life: 'You will live long and be a pandit.' I have lived a long life, and I became a pandit.

I have seen Sri Ramakrishna and touched his feet. Whether I understand it or not, Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna saw me and touched my head—though only once. I know his glance and touch made me fortunate forever.





EUGENE SALANDRA

## Hiranyagarbha

I THOUGHT Mina wasn't going to die anymore. But I should explain who Mina is.... A year ago an agitated twenty-year-old kid stumbled into the Vedanta Library here in Hollywood, where I volunteer. 'Is this a church?' he said. Before I could answer, he said, 'Could you guys pray for my mother? She's dying.'

In the few years that I've been manning the library, I've met a lot of interesting people and have had conversations on an array of topics, but it's not usually a matter of life and death. I wouldn't mind being able to hold forth on those topics, but I've had more practice explaining that although we are an American outpost of the Ramakrishna Order with roots in India, we are also an information resource about the 'perennial philosophy', the mystical approach to truth which finds the same reality at the core of all faith traditions, not only Hinduism.

But the visitor didn't ask anything about what we believed or what we called ourselves. He said his name was Sonny. He was Iranian. I asked him what his mom's name was and I mentioned that having a picture of her would help people here to pray for her. He said her name was Mina.

He ran across the street and returned with a photo of a beautiful woman with a little boy. The boy in the picture was Sonny in a ten-year-old body. The picture was ten years old, too. In the library, there's a portrait of Sarada Devi my daughter painted, and I put the photograph of Mina and Sonny next to it. I'm not sure I told Sonny anything about Sarada or her husband, Ramakrishna. I don't think he asked.

About a week later, while the Sunday lecture was in progress a few feet away in the temple, Sonny

brought the mother herself, a cancer patient, into the library. She was weeping inconsolably. Through his own tears, Sonny showed her how we'd put her photograph next to the painting of Sarada. Mina sobbed, 'Ah, you gave them the picture!?' I told her it was still theirs but that Sonny was keeping it next to Sarada for awhile.

Meanwhile, across the lawn, the swami's lecture had ended, so I went to the end of the reception line and asked if he wanted to come and talk to a woman in the library.

The swami and Mina had a private conversation which gave me a chance to find out from Sonny, as we waited on the lawn outside, that he was a US marine deployed to Iraq who had been given a 'compassion leave' to come home and be with his mother at her deathbed.

The swami finished talking to Mina and went to the living room to meet with devotees who'd heard his lecture. Mina and Sonny went home.

About a month later, on a weekday afternoon, Mina came back to the library. Her health had improved to the point where she now resembled her photo from ten years before. She had a huge bouquet of beautiful flowers. Barely saying hello, she brushed past me and approached the painting of Sarada. She put the flowers in front of it, so many that they almost covered the photograph of Sonny and herself. The flowers were dark red, pink, deep orange, and flame yellow, exactly matching the colours in the painting, as if the artist had painted everything at the same time. Mina was crying again, but these tears were different.

After that I started noticing her at events in the temple. For all I know, she may have been go-

ing there for some time; I never knew and I don't think Sonny knew, either. She was meditating and getting to know one or two of the nuns in our convent. When she came, she'd stop by the library to stand in front of the painting of Sarada for a minute or two.

It was probably two months ago that she came into the library for the last time, crying again. It was the first kind of tears again, the kind not made of joy, even though her condition was much improved. 'They're sending my son back to Iraq, because I'm not dying anymore,' she said. Looking over at the painting, she said, 'Can you do something to bring him back?'

I never saw Mina again, but today I was asked to be an usher at her memorial service in the temple. I got out the picture of Mina and Sonny. I put it in the only frame I had, which was holding a photograph of Ramakrishna.

I kept the picture of Ramakrishna hidden underneath and propped the frame up in the window of the library for the day's visitors to see.

At the service, arranged by Sonny—now a sergeant—and the nun who had befriended Mina, hundreds came including a crew from Iranian TV. It turns out that Mina was a celebrity in the local Iranian community, a pop singer, though she had never mentioned it to us. The mourners were a diverse lot; Mina's best friend was Jewish; Persian music was played; the Episcopalian chaplain from the US marines presided, weighed down with medals but visibly moved nonetheless. Everyone seemed glad to be in the Vedanta temple that, according to many of the speakers, had given Mina comfort in her last months.

One of the speakers pointed out that Mina was Iranian with a Muslim father, raised Catholic in Italy. So when she'd gotten sick, she hadn't known where to go! Another described a last visit with Mina in her hospital room, filled with pictures of Sarada. Several of her friends came into the library



*Mina and Sonny,  
ten years ago, and  
the portrait of  
Sarada Devi*



RORI CRONIN SCHNEIDER

afterwards, asking about Vedanta. I couldn't say much because the owners of a cello, a drum, and an unfamiliar zither-like instrument were rehearsing for the banquet after the service.

Finally, everyone went out to the parking lot to release white balloons and doves into the bright sky. The doves had been caged all their lives, a matter of a month or so; when they were released they flew for the first time, and two of them landed unsteadily in a tree—you know the big pipal tree outside the temple?—and for the first time looked down to see a hundred humans in black. Two of the doves are still in the tree almost three hours later, as if contemplating what to do with their freedom. Or maybe freedom is so absorbing that they don't need anything else. One of them is sitting calmly on a high branch, the other occasionally flutters from one lower branch to another.

I raised doves when I was ten, and I'm trying to remember what kind of grain I used to buy; maybe it would persuade them to stay around the temple for awhile. A humorist at the banquet has dubbed the birds Sonny and Mina.

I hope Sonny (boy, not bird) comes back so I can return to him the picture of him with his mother; that'll make room for a different photograph near the painting, just in case. I'm going to give him the frame, but I'm not going to remove the picture of Ramakrishna behind it. What's the use? He's behind everything.



# Kanchipuram, the Four-fold Glory: Vishnu Kanchi

Dr Prema Nandakumar

(Continued from the previous issue)

In the celebrated poem *Vishwagunadarsha Champu* by Venkatadhvari, the gandharvas Krishanu and Vishwavasu are found flying over India in an airborne vehicle commenting on various well-known pilgrim centres. Krishanu is always critical, but Vishwavasu can only see the good in everything. A very instructive and informative poem, the *champu* moves southwards from Badrinath to Chennai and thence to Kanchipuram. Vishwavasu gives a very warm description of the city, and salutes Varadaraja: 'As we reach the Hasti Hill, we salute the Eternal Flame (*Dhama Sthiram*) which rivals Kamadhenu (the cow of plenty) and the "wish-yielding tree", guards Indra and other deities, is holy, and has eyes that are cool with compassion and lips that are scented with yajna ingredients.'<sup>1</sup> But as he recounts the legends concerning Varadaraja, Krishanu must needs put a spoke in his wheel of enthusiasm: 'After all he (Varadaraja) stopped the progress of Saraswati. How can you praise him!'

The foremost temple of Vishnu Kanchi (also known as Chinna Kanchipuram) is that of Varadaraja, located in the eastern quarter of the city. The Puranic legend about the origins of the temple is easily told. Once upon a time Lakshmi and Saraswati went to Indra to find out who between them was superior. Indra spoke in favour of Lakshmi. Saraswati cursed him to be born as an elephant. She went to Brahma but he too said that Lakshmi was superior. Incensed, Saraswati took away his Creator's Staff. Brahma per-

formed tapasya to regain his staff. Narayana appeared to him and told him that if he (Brahma) could perform a sacrifice in Satyavrata Kshetra (Kanchipuram), he would get back his staff, as a yajna performed in this holy place is equivalent to one thousand Ashwamedha yajnas. Saraswati rushed upon Brahma's yajna as a flood, but was stopped midway by Vishnu, who lay across the path. Brahma successfully completed the sacrifice and out of the sacrificial fire rose Narayana as Varadaraja (one who grants boons). The Lord returned to Brahma his *srishti danda*. At that very moment, Indra, who had by now become the Hasti (Elephant) Hill, got Vishwakarma to construct a temple atop the hill for Varadaraja.

Historically speaking, the temple is more than a millennium old. Those who contributed to its building and growth include the Cholas, beginning with Rajaraja the Great (1018–54 CE), Pandyan kings like Sundara Pandya (13th cent.), the Cheras, and the Hoysalas. From the fourteenth century onwards the kings of the

Vijayanagar Empire took great interest in the temple. Their spiritual mentors included Kotikannikadhanam Lakshmikumara Tata desikan, of the famed line of Tatacharyas who were custodians of this temple. Among the mammoth structures built during this period is the celebrated Kalyana Mandapa, verily a connoisseur's delight. Each of the ninety-six pillars is exquisitely sculpted with

Lakshmi Varaha—  
a poem in stone

innumerable figures. Some



## Kanchipuram, the Four-fold Glory: Vishnu Kanchi

figures actually seem to be ready to leap towards us. Vishwamitra performing tapasya as Menaka dances, a cat trying to catch a dove, Hanuman giving the signet ring to Sita, the battle of Krishna and Jambavan, Rati and Manmatha flying on their parrot and swan mounts, and *gopika-vastrapaharana* (stealing of the gopis'

clothes) are some of them. There are scenes from the Ramayana and also trick sculptures aplenty—like a figure with three faces, four hands, and four legs; four monkey faces on the bodies of two monkeys; and an elephant when seen from the front appearing as a bull from behind. The irresistible marvels of this mandapam include the hanging stone chains. All the links in a given chain, including the stone plate from which it hangs, have been cut out of a single block of stone! Who was this divine sculptor? Who knows!

This Kalyana Mandapam is immediately to our left as we cross the Varadaraja Temple's front gopuram, which rises to thirty metres with seven tiers topped by nine *kalashas* (rounded pinnacles). Immediately behind the mandapam is the sacred pond, Ananta Pushkarini. Aththi Varada (an icon of Varadaraja made of wood, said to be the original deity worshipped in the sanctum) rests in a silver box beneath the waters and is displayed once in forty years. On three sides of this pond are various shrines. Lakshmi Varaha in a tiny niche is verily a poem sculpted in stone. Other deities enshrined in this area include Ranganatha and Sudarshana.

Going towards the hill which forms the centre of the complex, we offer our first salutations—to Yoga Narasimha in a cave. The Hasti Hill rises above this cave and has the sanctum of Varadaraja at the

Sri Ranganatha Shrine

top. Varadaraja is seen standing, facing west. The *utsava vigraha* (the image used for festive outings) of Varadaraja has marks on the face. The priest explains that these are due to the heat of the sacrificial fire from which the Lord appeared on earth. For just a few minutes one takes in the scene, and then the veils of history enclose us to recreate a very different world. How many are the mystic dramas that have been enacted in this tiny space!

Sri Ramanuja's formative years were spent here as a student. One of his teachers was Tirukachchi Nambi. Nambi's duty was to wave the chowry for the deity in the sanctum. Belonging to the trader caste, Nambi was the very image of humility. So pure was his devotion that the Lord would have a dialogue with him whenever they were alone. We are assured by legends that one day Nambi was able to get answers directly from the Lord for the questions that had been troubling Sri Ramanuja. Other spiritual luminaries associated with Varadaraja are Nadathur Ammal, Kuresha, and Vedanta Deshika.

Kuresha (Srivatsanka Mishra) was the earnest disciple of Sri Ramanuja who saved his master from





*The auspicious lizards*

an inimical Chola king. But he was himself imprisoned and had his eyes gouged out. When he was released and went to his master, Sri Ramanuja asked him to go and pray at Kanchipuram, since Varadaraja was an unfailing giver of boons. It is true Kuresha lacked physical vision to see the deity, but Varadaraja was a familiar presence to him, as he had grown up in Kuram, close to Kanchipuram. So Kuresha went to Kanchipuram, stood before the Lord in the sanctum, and offered his supplication through one hundred and two verses that became famous as the *Sri Varadaraja Stava*. We are told that when he was actually reciting the poem, the deity grew compassionate and asked him to choose a boon. Though Sri Ramanuja had hoped that

Kuresha would ask for the restoration of his eyesight, the humble sadhaka wanted only *paramapada* (supreme beatitude) for the one who had harmed him: 'The ananda that I am going to gain must be the portion of Naluran also!' (It had been under the instigation of Naluran that the king had turned inimical towards Sri Ramanuja and passed the order to gouge out Kuresha's eyes.) Touched by the devotee's kindness even to an enemy, Varadaraja gifted him the ability to perceive his divine form as also that of Sri Ramanuja. The radiant poem by the aged devotee is couched in easily sung Sanskrit. A magnificent description of Varadaraja marks the opening:

May the Lord who has been described as unequalled and peerless by the accents of the Upanishads, Hari who is atop the Elephant Hill, always grant me the good.

I surrender unto him who is a treasure to Lakshmi-Perundevi Thayar, a shoreless treasure unto those who seek his help, one who has vowed to grant the purusharthas desired by devotees, who is ever concerned with the well-being of all living beings, whose treasure is compassion, the king of all, the lord of immortals.

Having assured himself and all those who would read the *stotra* (hymn) as a manual of sadhana that Varadaraja is the never-failing goal, Kuresha seeks to image the Supreme Being verily as a Self-created Brilliance on the Hastigiri, and surrenders to the hill itself for having made this image hailed in the Vedas perceptible to human sight.

Vedanta Deshika was the author of several *stotras*, the epic *Yadavabhyudaya*, and the drama *Sankalpa-suryodaya* in Sanskrit. At the same time he had an unrivalled mastery of Tamil and was immersed in the hymns of the Alvars. Once, the traditionalists of the Varadaraja temple objected to his reciting Tamil hymns in the *prakara* (circumambulatory path around the shrine). Vedanta Deshika argued with them and won the day. He then wrote the poem *Tiruchchinnamalai* in praise of Varadaraja that is recited whenever the Lord is taken out in procession.

Once we leave Varadaraja's sanctum and move rightwards in the *prakara*, we come to the twin lizards in the eastern corner. This is a very popular sight and is considered sacred. Etched on the roof are two lizards with two circles that seem to represent the sun and the moon. Legend says that these lizards were originally brahmana boys. Once they went to the forest to bring water for their guru, Rishi Gautama. They inadvertently left the pot uncovered, and when Gautama wanted to use the water, out leapt a lizard. The rishi cursed his disciples to be born as lizards for a while for their carelessness. After they were released from the curse, Indra had a gold and a silver lizard made, and announced that whoever stands in this corner marked by the lizards and looks at the Hastigiri will get the merit of having recited Hari's name on an *ekadashi*, the auspicious eleventh day of the lunar fortnight.

Coming down the steps, we offer salutations at several shrines to such divinities as Dhanvantri, Malayala Nachiyar, and Perundevi Thayar (Goddess Mahadevi). Perundevi Thayar is a very noble presence who never fails to grant a sincere prayer. It is said that once Vedanta Deshika wanted to help a young brahmacharin who needed money to get married. When he composed and recited the *Sri Stuti* in the presence of Perundevi Thayar, there was a shower of gold. We now climb down to level ground and then go around another huge *prakara* which has niches to acharyas like Nammalvar, Ramanuja, Varavara Muni, and Vedanta Deshika.

Apart from Varadaraja's temple, Kanchipuram's Vaishnava ambience includes several other renowned elements of history, architecture, and literature. There is the temple at Urakam where the *mulavar* (main deity) is Trivikrama in a massive sculpted image. He has both his hands stretched sideways and the left leg lifted upwards in the act of measuring the skies. In the same temple we also salute three deities that were not originally residents of this temple: Jagadishwara of Tirunirakam, Karunakara of Karakam, and Karvana Perumal of Tirukarvanam. In times of political disturbance these images were brought here for safe custody and have remained here ever since. A little distance away from the front of this temple is a popular shrine to Chaturbhuj Anjaneya. Among other sacred places that are associated with Vaishnava presence in Kanchipuram are Tiruvekha (with Yathokathakari as the deity), Ashtabhuyakaram (Gajendravarada), Tiruthangal

(Dipa Prakasha), Tirukalvanur (Adivaraha), Tiruvelukkai (Narasimha), Tirupadakam (Pandavaduta) and Tirupavalavannam (Pavalavannar).

While all these temples have somehow survived the onslaughts of time thanks to the unswerving faith of the devotees, it is Parameshwara Vinnakaram which is talked about much for its history and art. Situated within a kilometre of the Kanchipuram railway station, this is one of the most ancient Vishnu temples. It is built in sandstone with an admixture of granite. The place was originally a math and was used by pilgrims on their way to Banaras. The present structure was built by the Pallava king Parameshwara-varman (also known as Nandi-varman II) in the eighth century. It has three sanctums, one above the other. Thus we worship Vishnu in the *asana* or sitting posture (Vaikuntha Perumal) in the sanctum on the ground floor, in the *shayana* or reclining posture (Ranganatha) on the first floor and in the *sthanaika* or standing posture (Paramapadanatha) on the second floor.

There are innumerable legends concerning this temple, which has been sanctified by the hymns of Tirumangai Alvar. According to one of them, Parameshwara-varman was gifted as a baby to his parents by the Lord himself, who came to them in the guise of a hunter. Since he grew up drinking the milk of elephants, he is said to have presented eighteen elephants to this temple.

What takes our breath away in this temple is the unending series of sculptures in the *prakaras*. Having been carved out of sandstone, they are crum-



*Sri Varadaraja Perumal*



Kanchi sculpture: Krishna destroying Bak-asura, far left; a Chinese pilgrim, left, and a horseman, right

bling, but restoration work by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has done marvels. One is left dumb with astonishment at the chisel of the sculptor that has created a video effect through several series: the battles between Pallavas and Chalukyas; the destruction of Hiranyakashipu by Narasimha; the killing of Narakasura by Krishna; the slaying of Vali by Rama; the events concerning the birth of Parameshwara-varman, his coronation, and the Lord teaching the king all the shastras are some of them. The Pallavas were fond of performing the Ashwamedha sacrifice, and this too has been illustrated. One can even see a pilgrim from China carved on the wall.

In more recent history, Krishnadeva Raya of Vijayanagar provided amply for the upkeep of the temple. At present it is under the control of the ASI. Just beside the temple there is a mosque. The mosque shares the tank of the ancient temple, underlining the tolerant attitude that prevailed here.

Kanchipuram is inexhaustible. One is simply overwhelmed by the legends, history, and historical monuments in the city and its environs. The

city appears to be a crucible in a divine laboratory. Religion and spirituality are seamlessly woven into secular life even today. The presence of several maths needs to be mentioned in this context. These include the Tondaimandala Adhinam, which is Shaivite and is headed by Sri Jnanaprakash Deshika Paramacharya; the branch math of Tiruvaduthurai Adhinam headed by Sri Sundaramurti Tambiran; the Upanishad Brahmendra Math, which has a famous icon of Dakshinamurti; and of course the Shankara Math guided by its pontiff, Acharya Sri Jayendra Saraswati. We also have now the Sri Ramakrishna Math at Karaipettai that is working ceaselessly for the strengthening of the bases of education, culture, religion, and spirituality that have made Kanchipuram famous for several millennia and drawn from Kalidasa the priceless compliment: 'As is jasmine amongst flowers, Vishnu amongst men, Rambha amongst women, so is Kanchi amongst cities!' PB

#### Note

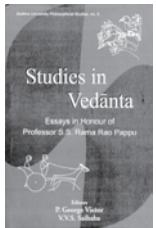
1. Varadaraja is said to have risen from the sacrificial fire at the yajna performed by Brahma on the banks of the Vegavati river.

*Sri Ramakrishna Math, Kanchipuram:  
happy readers, below left,  
and Balak Sangha, children's group*



# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,  
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



## **Studies In Vedānta**

Ed. P George Victor and  
VVS Saibaba

D K Printworld, 'Sri Kunj', F-52 Bali Nagar, New Delhi 110 015. E-mail: dkprintworld@vsnl.net. 2006. xxii+330 pp. Rs 550.

The book opens with Swami Vivekananda 'reminding his fellow citizens about the ancient and rich roots of Indic visions, and telling them that we must remember the blood that courses in our veins'. That was an inspiring call to enter into the modern world even while being anchored to our heritage, the wisdom of our seers, and the vitality of a culture that has withstood for centuries the shocks of foreign invasions, and a series of upheavals in manners and customs. The call remains valid today because 'the Upaniṣadic insight that every conscious entity is a reflection of the creative cosmic effulgence, as encapsulated in the Upaniṣadic great saying "tat tvam asi" is not only a lofty assessment of what we are; but it has immense potential, when internalized, for evoking the very best in us, goading us to caring, compassion and respect for fellow humans, for the spark of divinity in one and all of us.'

Vedantic insights have been seeping into Europe and America for more than two centuries now. Echoing the exhilaration of Schopenhauer, Müller, Emerson, and Thoreau, the Department of Philosophy, Andhra University, has brought out this important volume: a compilation of memorable essays in honour of Professor S S Rama Rao Pappu, who has been teaching philosophy in US universities since the nineteen sixties, and who founded the International Congress of Vedanta at Miami University, Ohio, in 1986.

The valuable essays on Vedanta have been grouped into six sections. Section One opens with Srinivasa Rao's 'Study of Gauḍapāda's Māndūkya-kārikā'. In his *kārikas*, Gaudapada takes the analysis of the states of consciousness to newer metaphysical heights, heights

that were not known to the earlier Upanishadic tradition. Not only does this metaphysic 'naturally and ultimately lead to a non-dual ultimate reality', it also clearly outlines the Advaitic position vis-à-vis the *vijñanavadins* and theistic Vedanta. K Srinivas's article 'Advaitic Understanding of Self and Human Rationality' brings out in bold relief how, unlike Western psychology, the psychological approach in the Indian tradition 'is inward rather than outward'. On the applied side, 'it emphasizes more on the ideals of life to lead a life of wisdom rather than the life of mere material comforts'.

Section Two has four essays on Advaita Epistemology and Ethics. Bijayananda Kar's article entitled 'Śaṅkara Vedānta on Śruti, Tarka, and Adhyāsa' deserves special mention, because therein Kar has clearly explained the Advaitic stand (as seen in the writings of Shankara and some post-Shankara Vedantins) with regard to the three levels of truth: *paramārtha satya*, *artha-kriyā-sāmarthyā-satya*, and *avidyā-upādhika satya*, which suggest three levels of reality. He rightly doubts if Shankara can consistently admit these three levels of reality in the face of non-dualism. In 'Tat tvam asi', Godabarisha Mishra has amply explained the Vedantic truth that the 'knowledge of identity [of the Atman and Brahman] is not the beginning of the spiritual journey, but the ultimate phenomenon'. Ganesh Prasad Das reiterates this point in 'Aham Brahmasmi'. Quoting Swami Vivekananda, Professor Das points out that *tat tvam asi* is essentially a scientific principle which asserts that the microcosm contains the macrocosm. The writings of Max Planck and Schrödinger echo the Vedantic view that consciousness creates matter, and not vice versa. Das also refers to J Feys's book *A = B*, which tries to explode the mystery of the Atman-Brahman identity with the argument that this 'amalgamation is fatal to philosophy as well as to religiosity. The distinction between the two, human and divine, is essential for the progress of man's understanding of reality'. Das' response to this flawed view is typically Vedantic: 'In Vedānta, there is no

aversion to any view, there is only delightful toleration; no rejection of any view, only harmonizing accommodation.' All so-called dualities like those between fact and value, religion and philosophy, and faith and logic are overridden by the supervening truths of Vedanta. In her small but forceful article on 'Vedānta Ethics' Maya Das has effectively underscored the ritual-centric, socio-centric, and self-centric moralities prescribed in the *Vedanta-sara*. 'The three phases of moral disciplines highlighted in *Vedānta-sāra* make evident that in no phase Vedānta has acclaimed life-negation. ... The very catholicity and receptivity of the Vedānta ethics, across the ages, have been nourished by the universal morality.'

The different schools of Vedanta and their compositions are dealt with in the third section of the book. The essays 'The Concept of Consciousness in Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭadvaita Vedānta', 'Doctrine of Sākṣī in Madhvācārya's Darśana', 'Vallabha's Interpretation of Vedānta', and 'The Echo of Vedānta in Tyāgarāja's Musical Compositions' have added grace to this anthology.

Section Four is devoted to a comparison of traditional Vedanta with other systems—Yoga, Tantra, the householder traditions, and the tradition of music and oral records, thus highlighting the uniqueness of the musical melody of Vedanta. This is followed by a section on 'Vedanta and Global Parallels'. The first article is about 'Vedānta Philosophy and Sartrean Existentialism'. Most existential ideas approximate the transcendental doctrine of Vedanta, the common grounds being provided by reason, action, and experience. 'But while in Vedānta truth is attained by the way of reason, Sartre needs reason to do away with the contingency of being in order to be able to attain and experience authentic existence.' R Jeevan Babu has rightly pointed out that 'while Sartre does not conclusively establish his understanding of existence ... Vedānta gives solution[s] and has a profound respect for truth.'

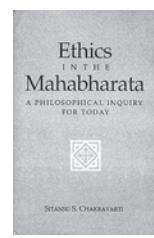
Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) has had a singular impact on contemporary philosophical thought with his 'primordial thinking of Being (*Seinsdenken*)'. In 'Advaita and Aletheia', J P Johnson compares the notions of Advaita in Shankara's thought and Aletheia in Heidegger's. The literal meaning of *aletheia* is 'truth'. But Heidegger views this 'truth' not in its opposition to 'untruth' or falsity, but as the process of revealing and concealing. 'We need to look at Advaita and Aletheia,' argues Johnson, 'not with the rigid logicality, but with a supra-logicality that

is able to "see" the *difference* rather than merely "the different". ... Śaṅkara and Heidegger have not taken us to a philosophy of confusion, but rather to a primordial realm that is intensively deeper and extensively wider [sic].'

The last section—'Vedanta and Contemporary World'—opens with V V Raman's analysis of the concept of transcendence as obtained in the Bhagavadgita, the *Katha Upanishad*, and classical Vedanta, and how a similar concept could be developed from the tenets of quantum physics, Einstein's theory of general relativity, and the concept of 'negative entropy'. Professor George Victor provides a lucid analysis of the concept of spiritual awakening as seen in the writings of S Radhakrishnan, who was equally at home with Western philosophy and Indian thought, and who interpreted Vedanta in the light of contemporary global issues. The series is rounded off with a study of 'Vedanta and Environmental Ethics' as exemplified by the work of Sundarlal Bahuguna. Bahuguna's ecological crusades, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts, are in line with the spiritual tradition of India and bring home the truth that true civilization belongs 'to those communities that live in harmony with nature'.

The editors, P George Victor and V V S Saibaba, deserve compliments for bringing about this valuable edition for scholars as well as serious readers. Rich in variety, this is a volume to cherish.

Prof. Amalendu Chakraborty  
Former Head, Department of Philosophy  
Presidency College, Kolkata



### ***Ethics in the Mahabharata: A Philosophical Inquiry for Today***

Sitansu S Chakravarti

Munshiram Manoharlal, 54 Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi 110 055. E-mail: [mrml@mantraonline.com](mailto:mrml@mantraonline.com). 2006. xxxvi + 176 pp. Rs 350.

**T**he remarkable range and sweep of the Mahabharata needs no reiteration. Its appeal and adaptability are perennial. Peter Brooks' unique performative text, the fictional configurations evident in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, the William Buck rendition, and Chaturvedi Badrinath's *Mahabharata: An Inquiry in the Human Condition* are instances of its inexhaustibility and adaptability to multiple critical and creative forms.

Professor Sitansu Chakravarti's book is a welcome addition to this corpus. It enriches our awareness of the ethical subtleties in the epic, though these issues have been widely and incisively explored by scholars like Matilal and Dandekar.

The coherent plan of this study reflects the general academic rigour and scholarship associated with American academia. Indeed, as Graeme Nicholson puts it in his appreciative foreword: 'Chakravarti is doing for the Indian texts what twentieth-century philosophers—whether of the phenomenological or the analytical tradition—have been doing for the pre-Socratic, Platonic and Aristotelian texts: reading them as philosophy, texts that are of such a calibre that we find ourselves obliged to listen to them and to learn from them.'

Professor Chakravarti tries to achieve this objective in five chapters, besides the introduction: 'Grounds of Morality in the Mahabharata', 'Morality in Practice in the Mahabharata', 'The New Value System', 'The Principle of Morality: The Contingent A Priori', and 'The Central Philosophy of the Mahabharata'. The basic assumption underlying the book is the idea that there is a 'new value system' signalled by the epic. Bhishma 'is the representative of the old value system of the time' who fails 'to have a glimpse of the wide spectrum of the utilitarianism to which Sri Krishna subscribes'. And 'the new value system ... makes it mandatory for people to work innovatively according to their capabilities towards the benefit of others', so that 'a just and proper system takes root in the subcontinent so that everybody can prosper'.

To achieve this, Sri Krishna takes 'dharma to a new dimension', which is—if I am not mistaken—'for the greater good of humanity through means that are questionable outside of the context'. In short, dharma permits dissociation of compatibility between ends and means. To neutralize the apparent paradox, Professor Chakravarti introduces, besides *dharma*, concepts such as *rta* and *satya*. *Rta*, he says, refers 'to truth though not facts'. *Satya* is 'truth as facts', as being, while *rta* is 'truth as becoming'. This 'becoming' is not factual or measurable, for it is an 'existential transformation into what one *really* is in one's state of freedom in unconditionality and joy'. The analogies for this human condition (which is *real*) are 'poetry and music which cannot be reduced to facts', particularly music which 'lacks a prepositional content'. But then, are 'facts' amenable to rigorous philosophical descriptions? For the author, fact in the accepted sense is—one can easily guess—

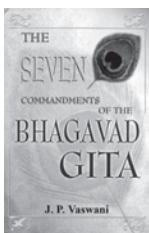
science. He asserts (with enviable élan) that 'science is the realm of facts not value'. The ethical dimension of the epic is thus utilitarian (through its mysticism), existential, and moral.

In a study of this nature, one cannot perhaps escape a certain amount of equivocation (specially linguistic ambiguity) and conceptual wool-gathering. Are there 'Indian' varieties of existentialism and utilitarianism? Or are they products of an ethos which, in Derrida's term, is 'philosophy proper'—which is non-negotiable? Cross-cultural studies should pay particular attention to the specificity of concepts which may change colour with context. But the references to Chomsky and Wittgenstein were what I found most intriguing. I wish these were elaborated, as they are potentially of great significance.

In sum, here is a fascinating approach to the great epic, and it sustains more than a glance.

*Dr M Sivaramkrishna*

Former Head, Department of English  
Osmania University, Hyderabad



### ***The Seven Commandments of the Bhagavad Gita***

J P Vaswani

Comp. and ed. Dr Prabha

Sampath and Krishna Kumari

Sterling Publishers, A-59 Okhla Industrial Area, Phase II, New Delhi 110 020. E-mail: [ghai@nde.vsnl.net.in](mailto:ghai@nde.vsnl.net.in). 2006. 418 pp. Rs 250.

This book is a compilation of the discourses and writings on the Bhagavadgita of Dada J P Vaswani, the spiritual leader of Sadhu Vaswani Mission. It analyses the teachings of the Gita and their application in life from the general viewpoint of a *bhakta*.

The first ten chapters discuss various introductory topics like the life of Sri Krishna, the story of the Mahabharata, and the background, the significance, and the essence of the Gita. There is one chapter on 'Sadhu Vaswani and the Gita'. The title-theme is covered in chapters eleven to seventeen, which successively consider the seven commandments: (i) 'Thou shalt not identify thyself with the body', (ii) 'Thou shalt not fail to do thy duty', (iii) 'Thou shalt do thy duty and a little more', (iv) 'Thou shalt not miss thy daily appointment with God', (v) 'Whatever thou doest, do it for the love of God', (vi) 'Thou shalt seek the lowest place', and (vii) 'Thou shalt rejoice in everything that the will of God brings to

thee'. These commandments are the author's summary of some of the important Gita teachings, and have been presented in a graded form for spiritual seekers to practise. Excerpts from the Gita and other texts, sayings and incidents from the lives of great men, and numerous anecdotes and illustrations have been cited to impress the commandments upon the mind of the reader. Many illuminating comments are strewn throughout the text. In particular, this reviewer found the interpretation of certain traditional conventions and customs—such as those of removing one's shoes while entering temples (148–9) and worshipping Hanuman (151)—edifying.

The discussions contain numerous references to the holy books of different religions, and in particular, to the utterances of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Anyone going through the book would also be impressed by the author's internalization of the thoughts of the Gita and his remarkable mastery of the English language.

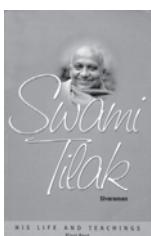
Though the author's outlook is singularly liberal, some of his interpretations could be contested (as could any alternate interpretation); for instance, he describes the essence of the Gita as: 'All that has happened has happened for the best; all that is happening is happening for the best; all that is to happen, will happen for the best' (87).

The anecdote about Chittaranjan Das being present at the Chittaranjan Loco Works (241) is a howler; the Loco was started long after Chittaranjan's demise. Elsewhere (298–300) the story of Tul-sidas's life is mixed up with that of Vilvamangala. A little more careful transliteration of Sanskrit terms would also have helped.

Despite these minor blemishes, the book must be welcomed as a refreshing addition to the literature on the Gita.

*Prof. Shoutir Kishore Chatterjee*

Former Professor of Statistics  
Calcutta University, Kolkata



### **Swami Tilak: His Life and Teachings (First Part)**

Sivaraman

Sri Bajrangdas Kuti, Chipaneer, via Tiplparni, Harda 461 228. E-mail: [bajrangkuti@rediffmail.com](mailto:bajrangkuti@rediffmail.com). 2005. x + 230 pp.  
Rs 230.

**T**he spiritual possibilities of Mother India seem inexhaustible. From hoary antiquity to the mod-

ern age, the unbroken continuity of India's mystic tradition has given birth to many a saint, seer, visionary, and spiritual luminary. Swami Tilak's life provides insight into this truth.

This monk of extraordinary calibre was born in 1929 to parents who were simultaneously devoted to Indian culture and the socio-political movement headed by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, after whom he was named. Early in life, he developed a spirit of enquiry into the nature of Truth, and this was nurtured through religious piety as well as dynamic spirituality. He felt a tremendous urge for spiritual life, which made him leave his job as editor of the magazine *Panchajanya*. He clearly understood that it is important to change oneself before attempting to change the world around one. He went out in search of a spiritual guide who could kindle the fire of dispassion in his heart, and found one such master in Baba Bajrangdas Maharaj on the bank of the Narmada.

Babaji gave a new direction to Tilak's mind by instructing him to serve others besides continuing his personal search for God. In the beginning Tilak was reluctant, but his devotion to his master prompted him to pursue his advice seriously. As a result, he came out as a wandering monk who travelled throughout the length and breadth of the country, evoking respect from numerous pious souls as well as abusive criticism from atheists. But, unwavering as the huge banyan tree that sucked the waters of the Narmada, the itinerant monk never forgot his goal. His journey along the path of the world at large began in 1962 and took him to over fifty countries. He tried learning the local language wherever possible to better communicate the message of Indian spirituality and culture. But this story will have to await another volume.

Sivaraman has presented the story of this extraordinary life in simple and lucid language. The fact that he has avoided an ornate style and the tendency to muddle objective truth with mystery-monstering—to which many spiritual biographers are predisposed—is indeed praiseworthy. The narrative however is a bit disjointed and could have benefited from more careful editing. Yet Sivaraman's effort is commendable, and readers shall await the subsequent part.

*Swami Sanmatrananda*

Ramakrishna Mission

Viveknagar

# REPORTS



*Children's dance performance, Hyderabad*

## New Mission Centre

**Ramakrishna Ashrama, Comilla**, Bangladesh, has been made a branch centre of the Ramakrishna Mission. Its address is Ramakrishna Ashrama, Thakurpara, Comilla, Bangladesh. The centre runs an orphanage for about eighty boys, as well as a hostel for college students.

## Education News

The Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India, has recognized the degree college of **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur**, as a Scientific and Industrial Research Organization.

The Department of Technical Education and Training, Government of West Bengal, has issued an order sanctioning transposition of the **Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha's Shilparamadira, Belur**, previously a government-sponsored polytechnic, into a self-financing polytechnic, with diploma courses in civil, mechanical, and electrical engineering, with effect from July 2007.

## Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mis-

sion, Kadapa, inaugurated a free students' home for economically challenged high school boys from rural areas on 24 June. The home currently provides housing for ten students.

## Blood Donation

Sri Manik Sarkar, Chief Minister of Tripura, inaugurated a health-awareness-cum-blood-donation camp organized by **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Viveknagar**, at its Gangail Road sub-centre on 1 May. Eighty-two persons donated blood at the camp.

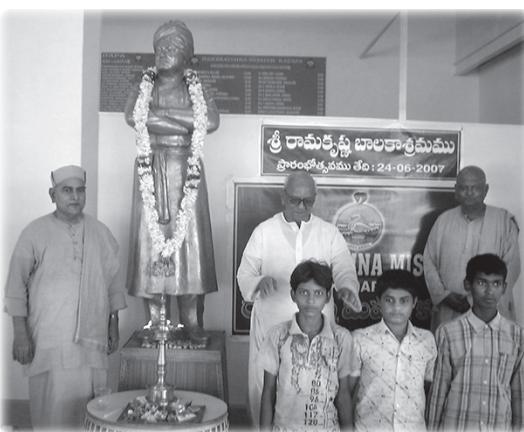
## News from Branch Centres

**Ramakrishna Math, Hyderabad**, conducted a month-long summer camp in April and May for 1,056 children aged eight to fifteen. Sri G S Singhvi, chief justice of Andhra Pradesh, inaugurated the camp on 22 April. In his address, he remarked that children need to imbibe culture at an early age so that they will develop into good citizens.

The children learned yogasanas, prayers, bhajans, Vedic chanting, Gita chanting, and moral stories from great lives, epics, and Puranas. Competitions were held on these subjects.

In the concluding programme on 19 May, chief guest Dr I V Subba Rao, Principal Secretary (Revenue Endowments), Government of Andhra Pradesh, stressed the need to instil self-confidence, the ideal of social service, and other such noble ideas in children. Participating children also performed dramas, songs, and dances during the programme.

**Ramakrishna Math, Chennai**, conducted a month-long summer camp in May 2007 for 400



*Inaugurating  
Students'  
Home,  
Kadapa*



*Inspecting fire damage, Rajahmundry; delivering relief, Udainarayapur; chest-deep waters, Sabang*

children aged eight to fourteen. The programme included yoga exercises, narration of the lives and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda, bhajans, drawing, spoken Sanskrit, and chanting of the Bhagavadgita and other Sanskrit texts.

Ten houses built by the Slum Clearance Board of the Tamil Nadu government through the initiative of Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, were allotted to leprosy-afflicted footpath dwellers in Chennai. The houses were handed over to the beneficiaries through the Math in a simple function on 1 June.

**Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Cherrapunjee**, organized a function on 9 June to mark the first phase of its platinum jubilee celebrations. Sri mat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presided over the function and released the new edition of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* in the Khasi language brought out by the Ashrama. Sri B L Joshi, Governor of Meghalaya, released the platinum jubilee souvenir. Several other dignitaries, teachers, students, and devotees participated in the function.

### **Relief**

Heavy rains in the first week of July caused flooding in several parts of West Bengal, Gujarat, and Orissa, rendering hundreds of thousands of people homeless. The following centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission have started extensive relief work in various districts: Contai (East Medinipur), Mayal Ichapur (Hooghly), Medinipur (West Medinipur), Kamarpukur

(Hooghly), Ramharipur (Bankura), Saradapitha (Howrah), Belgharia (West Medinipur), Tam-luk (West Medinipur), Rajkot (Rajkot, Jamnagar), Limbdi (Surendranagar), and Bhubaneswar (Jajpur). Steps are being taken to extend the relief work to other flood-affected areas. Further reports are awaited.

**Fire Relief: Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Rajahmundry**, distributed 505 kg rice, 101 kg dal, 50 kg tamarind, 11.5 kg milk powder, 225 blankets, 120 saris, 100 dhotis, 100 vests, 185 towels, 110 mats, and 101 sets of utensils to 101 families whose houses were gutted by a devastating fire at Kondamodalu, a tribal village in East Godavari district. **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh**, distributed 28 kerosene stoves to 28 fire-affected families dwelling in Colony 5, a slum in the city.

**Distress Relief: Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Cherrapunjee**, distributed 450 pairs of school uniforms to students of six nearby villages. **Ramakrishna Math, Kochi**, distributed school uniform cloth to 225 students living nearby.

**Refugee Relief: Ramakrishna Mission, Batticaloa**, continued relief operations among thousands of families who have moved to Batticaloa district owing to ethnic disturbances in Sri Lanka. During the month of June, the ashrama provided food items for breakfast, lunch, and dinner to 2,634 persons, and distributed 1,000 saris, 700 lungis, 200 T-shirts, 200 pants, 300 children's garments, and 100 bed sheets to the residents of various camps. 690 persons were given medical treatment at different camps.

